

For a Better Vision

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By Doaa Soliman

HOW can you get to know a different country's culture? Would it be by learning about its legal and legislative system or by interacting with its people and getting involved in their everyday activities, such as sharing their food and using their public transport?

Well, all these elements together would give you a great insight into another country's culture. But how about getting to know your own country better? For a group of young Egyptians, this involved meeting a group of young Germans.

These 14 young Egyptians spent a week in Berlin, on a visit organised by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, whose purpose was to introduce young NGO representatives to Germany.

"I'm no longer the same person; the visit has changed a lot about me," Marwa Hegazi, a vet, told the *Mail*, describing the impact of her weeklong trip.

"The experience has opened my eyes to many things that I'd never thought about. It taught me a lot about Germany, as well as highlighting certain issues about me."

This young woman in her late twenties suffers partial moving impairment. Yet, since returning back home, she has added an hour-long walk to her daily routine – a habit that she picked up in Berlin.

"I have special needs, but I never had to ask for help during my week in Germany, as the pavements and other walking areas are specially designed for people like me. This showed me how much can I count on myself, I can do it!" Marwa added.

Since 2006, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) in Cairo, in co-operation with the Programme for Civilisation Studies and Dialogue of Cultures at Cairo University and an NGO called Nanna (Development in Arabic), has been organising a yearly summer school for sustainable development, every July.



WELCOME TO GERMANY: The 14 young Egyptians and one of their German friends, pictured during the eye-opening trip.

Each year, 30 participants are chosen from different Egyptian universities and backgrounds to participate in this summer course, which consists of lectures about sustainable development and field visits to relevant projects. At the end of each course, the participants work on their own small project.

This year, KAS invited a selection of the graduates of this summer school from past years who are still active in different segments of civil society, to visit Berlin for one week.

"In many ways, Germany is very different from Egypt," Andreas

Jacobs, the Resident Representative of KAS, told the *Egyptian Mail*. "For instance, we've certainly got NGOs founded by groups of young people who come to work together. But the main focus is on big organisations working all over the country."

Working in the community or development in Egypt mainly involves small, civil-funded NGOs or small individual initiatives, whereas in Germany NGOs are large and might receive public funds – taxpayers' money, as Jacobs put it.

"Different models are an asset for the trip, because they encourage

creativity and getting inspiration from the ways other people do things," he concluded.

During the week, the group – all aged between 20 and 30 – had the opportunity to visit different German governmental institutions as well as non-governmental institutions working in different fields of civil society in Germany. They also met with politicians, journalists and NGO representatives.

For "the hybrid group," the experience was very rich, yet everyone benefited individually in different ways.

While Tamer Mohamed, a 21-year-old Masters student, was engaged trying to figure out the different systems and models for NGOs, Mahmoud Atef, a 26-year-old volunteer with Nanna, was fascinated by Germany's public transport.

"They are interlinked," says Mahmoud, describing the two issues that concerned him and his colleague.

"When I saw the transport system, I realised how the countries are then meeting people from different NGOs or even politicians emphasised the fact that we aren't following the same model."

This trip was the first ever for Mahmoud, who is mature enough not to have been "blown away" by the experience and to be reasonable in his comparisons.

He didn't just compare the public transport in both countries, but also found himself delving into economics, political systems and even the food.

"Civil society in Germany does what the Government can't do and I'd like to see that here," Tamer says, shedding light on the bureaucracy facing many NGOs in Egypt and the lack of co-ordination between the former and the Government.

Another thing that caught Tamer's attention is the issues tackled by the NGOs in Germany. While NGOs in Berlin tackle issues like climate change or global warming, the Egyptian ones are still struggling to provide food, clean water and jobs for many of Egypt's 80 million citizens.

For Egyptian academic supervisor Heba Raouf, who works at Cairo University and accompanied the group on the trip, volunteering in Egypt is entirely different from anywhere elsewhere. She stresses that passion stands behind voluntary work here.

"What captures people's hearts here and makes a difference isn't a systematic plan but rather passion," she explains. "Our culture says that God rewards people for doing good, which is why volunteering isn't paid in Egypt, while elsewhere it could be."

Amira Hossam (26), one of the founders of Nanna, says she learnt something else. She has come to realise that there is nothing that fits all. "I'm learning a 'thinking' model not an active one," she comments.

In only seven days, each of the 14 participants learnt something about Germany, but also Egypt and what they can do to contribute to its future.

"In Berlin, for the first time in my life, I learnt how to read a city," says Nesma El-Gowhri (24), who also works for Nanna.

"Since coming home, I've been reading Cairo's streets and I'm amazed how streets and buildings represent people. Seeing another culture opens one's mind. It introduces you to the other, but more importantly it teaches you something about yourself."