

Interview of an Environmental Activist in Greece

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Following is the report of an interview with a Greek man, 57, married, father of two, architect, employed in the sector. Since his youth, this man has been active in social and political movements, but he has never sought a position of leadership in the groups to which he belongs. He is fairly often called upon by the local media - local radio and television - to comment on the current news and to present the positions, either of the architects' union or of the local environmental group. He responded to the questions in the questionnaire drawn up by the European Charter coordination team.

For him, responsibility is a path that he decided to take, of his own free will, within a complex of ethical, cultural, political, and social behavior and norms. "Taking up responsibilities" refers to a person's actions and choices taken as a whole. For him, the concept of responsibility is like the concepts of environment, public good, citizenship, future generations, and education of the young. As an example of the responsibilities he himself assumes, he speaks first of his responsibility to his close family environment, his children in particular. He refers mostly to their education - in the sense of the Greek term "agogi," the action of training the mind - as intended to kindle in them the love of justice and a socially responsible attitude, assuming their rights and responsibilities.

He considers that the irresponsible attitude found unfortunately too often around us is due to the lack of citizen education, as well as to the way public institutions and the Greek state work, which devalues the concept of "public good." Public good is indeed our right to goods such as healthy air, clean water, healthy food, and a clean sea. The state, through its "behavior," puts greater value on private interests, to the detriment of common goods.

Citizens are not born "responsible." Responsibility is a question of education, but also one that refers to the "behavior" of the state, of public administration, and of the members of parliament, who define the rules of the game. The state should be the first to comply with the laws it decrees. But in a state where laws are not respected by the very people who decree them, where citizens realize that infringement of the law is not punished, citizens are not educated as they should be. In the general chaos, citizens learn to pursue their own interests without worrying about ethical rules or laws. The state is then itself a factor of irresponsibility. We also observe that some social groups try to place responsibility for social problems on other groups, such as immigrants.

This activist assumes his own responsibilities by trying to live in agreement with his own ethical principles, to be open to others, to accept differences, to fight for his rights, and to follow the rules and laws of his profession. He tries, in his daily life, both private and professional, as well as in his political life (social and political action), to contribute to social change. It is precisely for this reason that he considers that he has no responsibility in questions of a general order, such as racism, the war in Iraq, air pollution, etc. Similarly, he does not feel responsible for the questions raised by the article on the corruption of the public sector in Greece (article included in our questionnaire). From the moment we are talking about an active citizen, the only point for which he could feel responsible is for not having fought a lot more or not having put more effort into social action. But you have to make choices and determine priorities. For example, he does not feel responsible for racism, since he has no racist behavior. He would probably be responsible for not taking part in an anti-racist movement. But he has chosen to devote his time and his efforts - as a priority - to environmental action. You can very well be a responsible citizen by fighting in the field that you choose. In everyday life there is also the consumption sector, where you can assume your responsibilities by consuming products that come from fair trade, supposing that you have the necessary information, that you have access to this type of product, and that you can pay for these products, which are sometimes more expensive.

The sector he is most interested in for his action in this sense is his contribution to changing legislative procedures. This is about the adoption of procedures that would take citizens' needs into account, and would put solidarity and social justice on the front stage. He considers that there are no obstacles for citizens or himself to taking on responsibilities. In our democratic system, there are no major obstacles to

citizen participation. Fortunately, the system of governance allows citizens to express themselves and participate in decision making. We do not live under a dictatorship, where any citizen action would be dangerous, or lead to being jailed. It is of course necessary to know whether an action is truly efficient, since the system resists all change. But we are all able to contribute to social change by associating with other people and exercising pressure to defeat the resistance of the system.

Concerning the Charter, he agrees with its principles overall. The text is very useful as a tool to raise discussion, dialog, and awareness regarding the concept of responsibility. He considers that the text should perhaps more clearly dissociate ethics from politics. You cannot confuse honesty with respect of the law. It should be made obvious that the Charter is placed in a framework of ethics, not politics. He acknowledges that it is very difficult to provide clear answers to challenges with a strong ethical dimension. Especially if millions of people are to be addressed, everywhere in the world, with different traditions, cultures, and everyday practices. Indeed, we are addressing a world of the rich and the poor, of well-established persons and those who have been left by the wayside, of the privileged and the destitute. He observes that even within groups of active citizens, there are divergent and even contradictory definitions and conceptions for several of the concepts laid out in the text on principles : human dignity, equitable distribution of wealth, ethical criteria, etc. If a single definition is proposed, then dogmatism is the risk. The answers to contemporary challenges are plural and depend on the given historic moment.

As for the use and usefulness of the Charter, he considers that it would be extremely difficult for this text to be adopted by governments or international organizations. It is not even that necessary. The world is full of rules listing rights (of individuals or nations) that are violated by precisely those who are supposed to defend them. Nevertheless, he endorses the Charter, considering that priority should be placed on its practical application. It would be more judicious to pursue the objective of public awareness raising on the concepts of the Charter and the adoption of the Charter by professional groups. These two objectives are based on the principle that man is at the source of any change. Achieving the social changes put forward by the Charter requires social consensus, but especially the adoption by individuals of everyday behavior. He observes at this point that it is easy to be "for" a law against corruption in the public sector, but it is a lot more difficult not to contribute, through one's behavior, to the generalization of corruption.

The first stage of the approach to be adopted would be to define a series of principles / basic ideas - which has been done in the Charter's writing. What needs to be done now is to stop discussing the content of the Charter and try to circulate it as much as possible. The questionnaire prepared by the European team is a tool for circulation. At the same time, discussion and research (on the significance of these principles and their practical application) should remain open and lead to the verification of our assumptions and assertions. We could then later adapt and improve the Charter if necessary. In any case, a methodology would have to be defined that would allow circulation and avoid any form of dogmatism at the same time.

1. The person whose interview is presented here is someone who endorses the Charter. His answers thus reflect the fact that he considers himself a member of the enlarged Charter circulation team. His intention is therefore to provide leads for greater efficiency in our action.
2. Obviously, representative democracy in Europe allows citizens to assume their responsibilities through social action. At least theoretically, the system of governance allows participation in decision making. What remains to be seen is whether citizens have the necessary information, the competence, and the will to participate and whether such action is truly effective given the inertia and resistance of the system.
3. As we, in our capacity as European Charter facilitation team members, move forward with these interviews, we realize that this discussion is mostly addressed to intellectuals. This type of questionnaire is a tool for research and awareness raising among persons with a certain level of education, who can grasp the concepts raised here and have the ability to enter into a theoretical discussion. This is a limitation that we have acknowledged in order to enlarge our action in a second stage to the general population, by choosing better-adapted communication tools.