

## 12. 'SEARCH II' in Italy

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**Gruppo Abele, Turin, Italy**

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## 1. Brief description of the organisation: Gruppo Abele

The Gruppo Abele is a charitable organisation that has been working in the social field for around 35 years in support of the most disadvantaged in society. The group's activities are focussed in three different, but interrelated directions:

- Initial outreach /community work,
- "cultural" and
- "vocational" work.

The overriding principle behind this organisation is that it is not sufficient to merely show solidarity through general projects, it is much more important to directly strive for social justice. For this reason, apart from the rehabilitation centres for drug addicts, harm reduction projects, low-threshold and drop-in centres, and support projects for prostitutes, cultural initiatives are instigated that aim to examine and compare these experiences while adopting and disseminating theories, ideas, themes and initiatives concerned with complex social needs.

A substantial part of the activities of the Gruppo Abele include:

- a study centre for documentation and research [Centro Studi Documentazione e Ricerche], which is directly involved with 'SEARCH';
- the journals *Narcomafie*, *Animazione sociale* and *Macramé* and
- the training programme, youth programme, publishing house, etc.

Within this context, great importance is attached to vocational activities. This is not just because more than 100 persons are employed by Gruppo Abele, including educationalists, psychologists, researchers, journalists and staff in the secretarial and accounting departments, but because the association has directly contributed to the establishment of numerous social cooperatives. These include joinery and tanning workshops, horticulture, recycling and work in penal institutions, etc. The function of these organisations is to provide an educational and emancipative means to reintegrate socially disadvantaged persons back into work. It is therefore clearly evident that a research and intervention instrument such as the RAR, which closely links research to the need for effective action, is extremely suited to the Gruppo Abele and its special facilities.

Moreover, the Gruppo Abele has already been dealing with the problem of drug use in the immigrant population for several years. This occurs primarily through a mobile project, which was the first outreach project in Turin. The members of this team contacted Italian and foreign drug users on the streets and in the squares of the city. Those who approached the street workers were given information, sterile injection equipment and counselling. The project is now being run under the direct auspices of the National Health Service [Servizio Sanitario Nazionale].

The Gruppo Abele is also tackling the phenomenon of substance use among immigrants from non-EU countries as part of other activities. The drop-in centre is a facility open to anybody who does not know where to stay during the day. Many immigrants also go there. It is a low-threshold service that has frequent contact with foreigners with substance-related problems who have entered the country illegally.

There are considerable similarities between the 'SEARCH' project and the various activities of the Gruppo Abele, and not just in terms of method but also regarding the actual scope of action. It was able to incorporate existing knowledge into the 'SEARCH' project and link the association's existing resources with other resources available in the city.

## **2. The transition from 'SEARCH' to 'SEARCH II'**

### **2.1. The results of 'SEARCH'**

The research and analysis work conducted in accordance with the Rapid Assessment method in SEARCH showed that, in terms of general substance use, the North African population in Turin is most at risk, although other groups such as South Americans and Romanians are also identified, particularly in connection with alcohol misuse. Within the North African community there are at least three vulnerable groups:

- 1) Adult users using different substances,
- 2) Problematic alcohol users,
- 3) Youths and juveniles who are users of different substances

#### *1) The adults*

These are drug addicts who have been using substances for a considerable time and, in some cases, are already known to the staff in the specialist establishments. Heroin and cocaine are the most frequently used substances and many people from this group are in prison for drug dealing. The life context in which these people find themselves places them under considerable physical, mental and social pressure, caused in most cases by unemployment, lack of any perspective, lack of accommodation and isolation. The situation is worsened by the harm caused by the continual misuse of drugs, which are often used under the most dire hygiene conditions. This creates living conditions that are characterised by considerable exclusion. In general it can be said that a feature typical of this group is the search for a numbing and "self-healing" effect. Although this group appears to be relatively well informed about the risks associated with the substance use, their knowledge of the available care facilities, however, is deemed to be insufficient.

#### *2) Alcohol users:*

Problematic drinking appears to affect three different North African user groups: Working adult users (during leisure time, at parties); adult users suffering from exclusion (chronic drinking, homelessness); youths and juvenile users (emulation, feeling of freedom, etc.). Often the alcohol misuse leads to serious problems in the families; in many cases it serves as support, for example when activities are conducted that are considered "degrading" such as window cleaning or begging. It has turned out that the aspect of religion plays a central role with alcohol. Some people are of the view that, in this group, the differences with their homelands are not so great as might be believed because alcohol use is actually quite prevalent there (even if secretly and with the specific intention of becoming inebriated). Other people, on the other hand, point out that Muslims are forbidden from drinking alcohol and this accordingly gives rise to feelings of guilt when alcohol is drunk. Nevertheless, one thing that can be ascertained is that a lack of social control, which in the homeland is exercised by relatives, friends and neighbours, is a factor leading to an increase in alcohol misuse in the reception country.

#### *3) Youths and juvenile persons (12 to 25 years old)*

The use of heroin through injection seems to be hardly existent among younger persons. The most widespread psychotropic substances are cocaine, Ecstasy, hashish, alcohol and, in sporadic cases, solvents. Often, some of these substances are used in combination (alcohol + hashish, alcohol + Ecstasy). Within this group it is possible to distinguish between two types of substance users:

- Social fringe groups (young people without families, without a home or work);
- integrated youths who have work or a family and attend school, and who use substances for the first time under the same conditions as their Italian peers.

In the former case, they begin using substances as a result of drug dealing, for which the migrant North African youths are recruited.

The final focus groups that were held as part of the RA have led us to believe that it would be more effective to target preventive measures at the last mentioned "vulnerable group" (i.e. youths).

One of the results of the preventive measures taken in 'SEARCH' was the creation of a network between all staff in public and independent social services that deal with foreign minors. This is the work group that, within the framework of 'SEARCH', developed the guidelines for a preventive campaign that is aimed specifically at the target group in question. It turned out that the aforementioned youths often lack basic knowledge about the substances. Sometimes they are incorrectly informed and sometimes not at all. One of the most practical suggestions for prevention envisages the use of creative communication forms in order to reach the target group. Here it also became clear that the educational work would be more effective if the youths belonging to the target group were already involved in the production of the information material. A first step in developing an efficient educational campaign consisted of networking those staff in public and independent care establishments who come into constant contact with these youths. At the conclusion of 'SEARCH', those professionals who were involved in the network developed a joint project, having agreed upon a working method. The specific recommendations of the working group are as follows:

- 1) Developing "culturally sensitive" information material,
- 2) Involving a group of North African youths in the production of the material,
- 3) Conducting regular monitoring.

Thus the activities conducted within the framework of 'SEARCH II' have accordingly concentrated on these three working areas.

## **2.2. The dissemination of the RA methods**

During the period between 'SEARCH' and 'SEARCH II', the Gruppo Abele's study and educational centre sought approval for three different drug addiction projects from the local authorities in Turin and the Piemont regional government – projects that were able to use and disseminate the Rapid Assessment Method. As a result, the RA methods and their utilisation in the problem area of substance use in the immigrant population met with growing interest and greater openness. The extent to which interest in this method has grown is illustrated by the fact that all three projects were positively assessed, even if only one of them was ranked high enough to be financed. This is concerned with a training event for the Rapid Assessment Method that will begin in February 2004 and for which more than 20 professionals from public and independent social services have registered.

## **3. The RAR monitoring as clarification process: results, further developments, changes**

The situation in Italy is currently changing. The reasons for these developments are:

- 1) the new immigration law,
- 2) the new (not yet authorized) provisions for asylum seekers,
- 3) the abolishment of the visa requirement for travellers from Romania,
- 4) the possibility to legalise 700,000 immigrants (in addition this includes the corresponding uniting of families).

Particularly in Turin, there is increasing social concern about the growing problem of criminal gangs of youths (pickpockets, beggars, drug dealers; some of whom are less than 14 years old). There are no epidemiological studies or observations regarding increased drug use among juvenile immigrants that would provide an overall picture. However, street workers and members of the mobile team know of very young Romanian youths who inject heroin. The monitoring process envisaged as part of 'SEARCH II' was introduced against this background.

### **3.1. New information about the context**

The most important sources that we drew upon in order to gain new information on substance use in North African or other immigrant populations are:

- Newspaper articles,
- Members of mobile teams,
- Street workers,
- Staff from authorities in the city of Turin responsible for juvenile foreigners.

From the aforementioned sources, we were able to glean the following insights:

*1) There still exists the phenomenon of drug dealing and substance use (cocaine, alcohol, inhaled heroin, Ecstasy) in the young North African population.*

*2) There are bands of youths (some of whom of less than 14 years old) that are smuggled in by adult criminals from Romania and forced into drug dealing, pick pocketing and, according to anecdotal evidence, possibly even into prostitution.*

In April 2003, a police raid led to the arrest of 10 adults who controlled part of the aforementioned illegal activities. Generally, however, the situation has not changed.

### **3.2. Selection of key informants, Focus groups**

The selection of key informants for the systematic observation of the phenomenon occurred via those persons who proved to be the best informed within the framework of 'SEARCH'. The aforesaid persons, who belong to different working areas (street workers, cultural mediators, members of the Moroccan and Rumanian community, teachers, employees in the aliens office, representatives of facilities providing drug care), were asked to identify other persons who could possibly know about the latest developments concerning this phenomenon.

Based on the information that we had already collected, it was decided to set up two focus groups that would purely concentrate on assessing the current situation and development. The first focus group concentrated in particular on the group that had proved to be the most problematic within the framework of 'SEARCH' (juvenile persons from North Africa). The second focus group was given the task of examining the situation of illegal substance use in the remaining population of young immigrants in Turin. The composition of the two focus groups was as follows:

**Focus group 1 :** 2 cultural mediators  
2 social workers  
1 lawyer

- Focus group 2 :**
- 2 employees from public drug care facilities
  - 4 social workers
  - 1 teacher at the youth detention centre
  - 1 cultural mediator
  - 1 responsible member of staff from the authorities for foreign juveniles
  - 1 member of staff from the authorities for foreign juveniles

**Focus group 1:**

Results are in summarised form, organised according to the individual key questions:

⇒ Who are the users?

The young North African users of illegal substances living in Turin can be distinguished by two characteristics that are also decisive for their different access to drugs.

- Youths who live in families
- Unaccompanied youths.

⇒ What do they use?

The substances which are not only used most of all, but which also raise the greatest concern, are: cocaine, alcohol and Ecstasy. We were able to confirm the use of heroin through smoking or snorting (only a few cases of intravenous use were able to be confirmed), the occasional use of solvents and the widespread use of cannabis.

⇒ Definition of problematic use

The greatest problems that are associated with substance use are related to the living conditions of the young immigrants. This particularly applies to youths without parents or guardians. Thus it is not just the substance use alone that is problematic but also the general situation. Their involvement in criminal activities (often drug dealing) not only causes psychiatric and physical harm to the youths through the use of substances, above all it exposes them to the risks inherent to a life of crime.

With those youths who live with their families and in many cases attend school and have Italian friends, the problem of substance use is also a cultural problem. There is no culture of alcohol use or "freedom" as known by Italian youths of the same age. This culture is misunderstood by the Moroccan youths, which leads to excessive and dangerous behaviour.

⇒ Factors

As has already been explained, the existence of a family environment has proved to be a distinctive feature that is linked to different behaviour patterns and situations. Families cannot always be regarded as a positive resource. In some cases, difficult family relations and differences between traditional values experienced in the family of origin and those acquired in Italian society, as well as too strong parental control, produce situations that encourage deviant behaviour. Furthermore, in many cases it was ascertained that there was a lack of correct information, in particular regarding synthetic drugs.

The results produced by this focus group confirmed the results that we had managed to gain during 'SEARCH'. As a consequence, the members of the focus group have decided to develop a joint prevention programme specially designed for educating the target population. The last focus group meetings were already used for planning these measures (see section 2.3).

## **Focus group 2**

### ▣▣▣ Who are the users?

These are very young Romanian youths who are smuggled into Turin by criminal organisations. They are mostly of Romany origin.

### ▣▣▣ What do they use?

The substance giving most cause for concern is heroin, which the immigrants have until now not used by injection.

### ▣▣▣ Definition of problematic use

In this case as well, the psychiatric and physical problems caused by substance use are also closely linked to the general living conditions. The youths often live on the street, sleeping in derelict factories or, if at all possible, in extremely run-down boarding houses. When they arrive in Italy, they have often left a social situation in their homelands characterised by exclusion. In Turin, Romanian youths face considerable social stigmatisation that can be attributed to their illegal activities – a context that is very unfavourable for developing schemes for resocialisation and integration.

### ▣▣▣ Factors

The factors that have contributed to the increasing phenomenon of substance use among juvenile Romanians seem at first sight to be linked to the easing of restrictions for entering Italy (there is no longer a visa requirement). The fact that many youths are used to living on the streets makes it more difficult to establish contact and to find a starting point for including the youths in the resocialisation and support projects. Forced prostitution, for which there is no certain proof, however, could also be an important factor for the spread of substance use.

Finally, given that there are a series of possible projects for foreign minors, the participants in this focus group agreed to hold regular meetings to consider the possibilities for collaborating and conducting the various initiatives.

## **4. The (local) tasks and their implementation:**

As has already been explained, in terms of prevention work the results from 'SEARCH' have already shown the need for developing instruments for educating North African youths living in Turin about substance use. Since 'SEARCH', it has been considered essential to involve the target community in the development of the instruments. The monitoring assessment conducted as part of 'SEARCH' confirmed these findings.

### **4.1. Prevention**

Some of the members of the network that had been activated since 'SEARCH' were involved in the first phase of the preventive interventions (May until September 2003). In particular these included persons who were in direct and constant contact with the North African youths. Six meetings were held at which some reference persons participated from the following public and independent social services:

- 1) Publicly-run drug care facility at the Ferrante Aporti youth detention centre,
- 2) The Sanabil cooperative for cultural mediation,
- 3) The ASAI association for intercultural care.

The contacted reference persons have declared their willingness to get involved in the youth work envisaged by the action programmes developed in 'SEARCH'.

The participants in the meetings dealt with the following themes:

- Choice of context and the group of youths to be involved
- Updating the teachers' general knowledge regarding drug misuse
- Modalities for accessing the youths to be involved
- Determining the working stages and timeframe for the meetings

This work phase, which was completed in September 2003, led to the following results:

1) As a result of the times and work modalities foreseen by the project, it was decided to involve a group of youths in the prevention work for 'SEARCH II' who attend the Sanabil cooperative's day centre. The North African youths visit the cooperative every day after 5.30 pm to spend several hours there with the teachers or to participate in initiatives aimed at their social and cultural integration. They also receive support should there be any problems (school, residence permit, information on overnight shelters, possibilities for board and lodging, etc). In the period foreseen for SEARCH II, the dates scheduled for youth work by the ASAI association (a youth centre for foreign juveniles) were already reserved, and collaboration with the youth detention centre would have required so much bureaucratic effort to obtain the necessary permission that the start of the work programme would have had to have been postponed. However, both faculties have declared their willingness to follow the prevention work and have expressed their interest in disseminating the educational material produced. Furthermore, in view of a possible resumption of this kind of work, they are interested in evaluating the results of this direct drug work with young North Africans.

2) The attempt was made at these meetings to gain an overview of the situation concerning substance use in the Turin area and to update relevant knowledge. Here, the fact that a representative from the local drug care centre took part in the meetings proved to be useful.

3) It was determined how the youths in question were to be persuaded to get involved in the work and how the workshops should be designed. It should be born in mind that some of these youths using substances do not have the correct papers and some of them are also involved in minor drug dealing. Accordingly, the following procedure was agreed upon:

- The proposal to participate in the work programme was to be put to the group of youths by the teacher, a Moroccan, who spends considerable time with them and enjoys their complete trust. This teacher was also to take part in all workshops as an interpreter and provide support.
- It was intended to introduce the work programme to the youths as a series of rather informal discussions on the subject of drugs. It should be clarified here that the latter purpose was to compile information to be incorporated into a brochure that was to be written in a language (Arabic or French) that can be understood by the North African youths.
- The attempt was to be made to identify those persons within the group who are most attentive and receptive in order to stimulate their ability to lead and to convey information.

4) Finally, a schedule was determined for the workshops with the youths and a title for this initiative decided upon: ("*Tell everyone*: Joint production of information material on narcotics for the target group of North African youths"). Everyone agreed that although the production of information material is in itself important when conducting this type of prevention work (which in Turin does not exist in the Arabic language), perhaps much greater importance should be attached to the method of working. The direct inclusion of the youths encourages them to adopt the prevention-relevant contents themselves. In addition, it is assumed that the youths' newly gained insights will be passed on to their friends and peers and that this oral communication will have a greater effect than the written material.



It should already be pointed out here that this workshop phase eventually required considerably more time to discuss the predetermined points than had been originally envisaged. There are several reasons for this, which will be discussed in more detail below. Therefore it also makes sense to describe the original work programme that was developed in order to be able to then compare it with what was actually carried out. The start of work was fixed for 9<sup>th</sup> October. The first workshop was to be concerned with the following key questions:

- Which substances do you know of? (brainstorming)
- How are they described in your language?
- How were you introduced to these substances and when?
- How are these substances used and where?
- What are the differences between Italy and Morocco in this regard (which substances do and do not exist, what are the differences in use and in terms of 'social stigma')?
- List the substances (including alcohol) according to their degree of risk and substantiate this!
- Characteristics and hazardous of the individual substances

The second workshop was designed as follows:

**In the group: Analyse the information brochures written in Italian:**

- Have you already seen these brochures anywhere before?
- What do you understand and what don't you understand?
- In your opinion, what should be made clearer?
- What's missing?
- What would you change to make these brochures easier to understand for Arab-speaking youths?
- Where should they be distributed?

**Presentation of the results of the group work:**

Based on the information collected, texts were to be written in Italian that would be presented to the youths with the help of the interpreter/accompanying person in order that the following points could be completed by the next meeting:

- Analysis of the rough version
- Collecting comments
- Joint correction

**4.2. Production and results**

This led to a series of workshops in which around 12 youths participated who were aged between 14 and 19.

► *The group*

The group, which consisted entirely of Moroccans, turned out to be heterogeneous since the youths came from different regions, had different cultural backgrounds and had lived in Italy for different lengths of time. There were "integrated" youths who attended school, spoke good Italian and whose relation to the substances was similar to that of their Italian classmates, and there were timid new arrivals who came from small towns in the most backward regions of Morocco and thus had a completely different cultural background. It became clear that the youths had little or no knowledge of French.

### ► *The workshops*

As has already been mentioned, it soon became necessary to change the timeframe for the meetings. What were originally planned as occasional meetings (two meetings to discuss the content and one meeting for correcting the rough version) became weekly events, which took place from October 2003 until January 2004. Here it should be born in mind that in November all participating youths observed Ramadan. Therefore it was ensured that the times of the planned workshops (which were the only possible times considering that some of the youths attend school or were trainees) coincided with the time of day in which the youths were allowed to eat. The cooperative supplied bread, eggs, tuna fish, biscuits and milk. In this month, however, it was still possible to tackle the planned subjects in accordance with the work programme.

The second aspect that should be pointed out concerns the living conditions of the youths. Many of them are waiting for a residence permit for juveniles, others on the other hand are occasionally mixed up with small-time drug dealing, while others are still struggling with the language. What they all have in common, however, is the fear to speak openly since they believe that the police and their informants have a greater presence in Italy than is actually the case. As a consequence, it took a considerable length of time before it was possible for spontaneous discussions to take place as part of genuine group work and for the real impressions of the youths to come to light. Therefore the first two meetings were almost exclusively used for mutually 'studying' one another, and it was interesting to observe that the youths always spoke Arabic to the mediator who was present (even if they could speak Italian), as if to have it confirmed that what they wanted to say could really be said. In the end, instead of the two meetings that were originally envisaged for developing the text, six meetings actually took place. In January 2004, the text was "authorized" by the youths and it was possible to move on to technical aspects such as the translation and layout.

### ► *Multicultural aspects*

From the analysis of the work carried out it has been possible to gleam several useful insights that can provide suggestions and guidelines for all professionals intending to focus on drug prevention work in connection with North African youths. Obviously, the following aspects are relevant:

#### • **Basic knowledge**

The group of youths seemed to have a very heterogeneous state of knowledge regarding the phenomenon of drugs. This applies both to the various substances circulating in Turin and the risks involved in using substances. In particular, two aspects needed to be taken into account:

- How long they had stayed in Italy;
- the Moroccan region of origin.

Those youths who have already been living for one or two years in Italy were informed about substances to an extent commensurate with any group of Italian youths. In terms of the regions, we were able to ascertain that in the north of Morocco, which is closer to Europe, there is certainly some knowledge of the substances usually used, including synthetic substances such as Ecstasy, etc. The youths from the southern parts of the country, however, have only come into any form of contact with drugs upon arriving in Italy, albeit in terms of just having knowledge of them. This aspect turned out to be of particular importance when choosing the content of the information material. The first meetings served to circulate the available material, which some youths already had, and to add new details and information, in particular regarding legal aspects and the social and healthcare services available to persons with substance-related problems.

- **Language**

It turned out that the French language is not very widespread. Therefore it was decided to just translate the brochure into Arabic. The information also clearly needed to be brief and to the point. Some material written in Italian seemed "strange", which was hardly surprising since a presumed youth language had been used, mixed with jargon and slang expressions. It is hard to recreate such linguistic styles for the young Moroccan readers of the brochure. Therefore a brief, concise and blunt text was chosen that was limited to the necessary information.

- **Legal aspects**

The work with the group revealed that there is often no knowledge of the legal aspects. The fact that Italian law distinguishes between individual substances as well as between possession and dealing in drugs is hardly known. It is also possible that the aforesaid provisions, which are less strict than the Moroccan ones, are underestimated and are considered more lenient than they are. In this case, we also limited it to the essentials, preferring to keep the presentation clear and simple.

- **Analysis of the means of presentation**

One meeting was devoted to Internet research. A search was made for Moroccan sites or sites with information relevant to drugs. We were unable to find any important sites, however, but just a few sites about HIV prevention that were assessed in terms of their graphic and visual design. We were not able to determine any substantial differences between the material and that which is published in Italy, which may be because some of these campaigns are in turn modelled on European ones. The analysis of the Italian material showed that the graphic design, consisting of comics, drawings and images, was certainly understandable, which indicates the closeness of the Moroccan youth culture to the European one. The references to music, including hip-hop culture and rap music, were immediately clear and understandable, and therefore useful.

- **Respect**

A last important aspect concerned the 'style' to be adopted in conveying the content to the youths. The joint work showed that the entire group (including youths who live on the street) generally had considerable respect for the adults. This was habitual, and was due to the social and family model in which they have grown up. It was an altitude that almost proved to be an obstacle at the beginning, but which we were then able to utilise in maintaining keen interest and increasing the youths' involvement. This aspect was discussed with the mediator and the other teachers. Finally, both in the brochure and in the relationship to the youths, it was decided not to overemphasise the authority aspect, while at the same time avoiding an accomplice-like tone that is often characteristic of analogue prevention projects addressed at Italian youths. It was felt that too much familiarity, or the delegation of responsibility ("I'll tell you the risks and you do what you think is right..."), would run the risk of being viewed by the youths as weakness, as a lack of authority and sincerity. The content and the information on prevention would therefore lose credibility.

## **5. Conclusions, prospects (networking, political implementation, etc)**

Between November and January, several prevention projects financed by the Health Ministry were run in Turin that specifically addressed substance use in the young immigrant population. In February, the members of the network founded as part of 'SEARCH' will meet to gain an overview of the above-mentioned projects and to sound out the possibilities for interaction. As far as the work with youths in the Sanabil cooperative is concerned, it has already been fundamentally agreed that the material shall be used and distributed where the most North African youths can be reached (authorities for foreign youths, youth detention centres, youth clubs). These groups and establishments had followed the work with interest. For their part, they have also expressed a willingness to take up this work within their own areas.

The entire work carried out within the framework of 'SEARCH' and 'SEARCH II' can be seen within the context of increasing public awareness of the problem of substance use in the immigrant population and has contributed to a more coherent and coordinated public response. It should not be forgotten that, inevitably, future development depends to a considerable extent on the political decisions of the Italian government. The draft law introduced by the government will make the existing legislation considerably more severe: it plans to abolish the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' drugs, to strictly limit the amounts of substances that persons may possess for personal use (should these limits be exceeded, possession will be put on an equal footing with dealing), and it will considerably reduce the possibilities for conducting projects for harm reduction. When the act has been ratified, these provisions will undoubtedly affect those projects that have been developed for the immigrant population. It is easy to foresee that in future it will be more difficult to involve the foreign population (in particular the substance users among them) in programmes that serve to cultivate open dialogue, debate and the sharing of information.