

Interview Tassew Shimeles To Take Root Means: to Develop Networks

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What is the meaning of the International Gardens?

The International Gardens are not only gardens, but also a social project. In this project we have been able to succeed in bringing people together who had different expectations, and do develop a vision together that can be applied to daily life. The vision is one that does not dwell on our differences, but rather uses them as a forum to strengthen what we have in common. A community network that is formed in such a way exists on the level of gardening, as well as on a social level. Through the project International Gardens, many people have learned how to read and write. All of us have learned to change our perspectives: To see both Germany, as well as the country of one's own origin, through different eyes. We have learned to see that, besides one's own problems, there are other needs too. There are women in this project who used to be afraid to go out in public. Today, they are able to present the project to others with a great deal of confidence. The project International Gardens gives manifold possibilities to express oneself. It's a forum that is relevant and of use to the entire society. It also gives us the opportunity to question ourselves. It's not a project that works only to explain the German society, but it also works the other way around: to explain and to understand the societies and cultures of the migrants. We, the migrants, are at a crossroad: what we brought with us from our homelands is no longer valuable and sufficient in order to be able to survive in the German society. We need to double-check our own foundations, our traditional knowledge, and its applicability. We need to recognise what is our own, and to adapt it to the Here and Now.

So it's like a plant that wants to keep on growing in a new place?

Yes, exactly. That's a good comparison. The gardens are a place in which we learn about diversity in a natural way. From the gardens, the diversity should then flow into the neighbourhood and its surroundings, in order to enrich society. To stimulate and to be stimulated: that's how our gardens work.

We have no fences in our gardens as an outward symbol that we welcome the new; that we want an exchange with the neighbourhood, with the city, and with other people, on both the gardening level, and on the symbolic level.

The gardens are the basis of this solidarity and of the social networks. People who are a part of a network are more stable. To take root means to create networks and relationships, and then to live them.

For example, we successfully work in the network with our partner cities (in Kenya, England, Russia and Poland) and with partners from church circles, such as representatives of the landless in Brazil and communities from India and Tanzania. We are creating similar network projects with the ijgd (an organisation für international youth projects). In the last years, we've organised work-camps with participants from the USA, France, Japan, Korea, Ukraine, Turkey, Denmark, Italy, Morocco and Mexico.

What is it that people need in order to take root in a new society?

People need to be accepted for the way that they are. True miracles happen when you recognise people für who they are, and also when you trust them. At the same time, you should not ask too much of people. You should take other people's experiences seriously because they are the base, from which we can develop and improve ourselves. We need to work with other people's experiences to be able to understand their realities and to find a common ground.

To be able to root yourself in a new society you need to have patience, a lot of input, and time for exchange and peaceful discussions. We need to have a perspective and we need answers to questions such as: How can we live together in this land tomorrow? What opportunities will our children have? How do we, as migrants, qualify to become Mayors, for example?

Do the gardens help people to become settled in their new land?

Yes. The gardens are places where we can learn, unfold, dream, laugh and cry. Through the gardens we live the vision that, by our own efforts and initiative, we can do something to improve our own lives and the harmony of living together in society. The gardens are not a neutral place where each person works only für himself. But instead, their intention is to teach us to become a part of the whole. The International Gardens need a vision, because a garden without a vision is only a garden.

It is especially important für us that the International Gardens give a lot of emphasis to participation. Our group is international and so are the project leaders.

Participation should be practiced on all levels; not just in the gardens, but also in the office. This is an important realisation of ours that has helped to support and enrich the exchange between people.

The gardens help to create a new life here and to help overcome the loss of one's home, house, belongings and friends. They help people to take on responsibilities in their new place and to create a future by their own efforts, here and not elsewhere, without always looking back. Because of all the things that we can build through the gardens, they help us not to give our children the thought that something has been lost.

The gardens' history is the same as that of the organisation: We started with nothing; we didn't even have a pavilion. And now, in Göttingen and its surrounding area, we have already built five gardens and have a complete office, as well as having received nationwide recognition for being a model of socio-political integration. The gardens have helped to change perspectives. In Germany, many people think that refugees are poor and the word refugee carries negative connotations. I am a refugee too. I'm a very well educated man. I get actively involved. I'm open towards people and I want to change things.

The example of my own life has changed the negative image of refugees. This is a good thing.

The recognition that we have received is great and encouraging.

The gardens have helped us to find partners and friends.

It is my heart's wish to expand this project ever more.

Tassew Shimeles, Project Director and founding member of the International Gardens

The project International Gardens was started in 1996 by German and migrant families from twelve different countries. The garden, as a place of digging, growing, blossoming, bringing forth fruits and dying, gives people who have been uprooted the opportunity to identify and socialise with their new surroundings. The cooperation of project members from different cultures in the gardens brings about understanding, tolerance, and intercultural competence.

Since 2002, this special integration project is being supported in other regions of Germany by the Federal Environment Ministry. The aim of the project is to unite social and ecological education, and to bring the contents of Agenda 21 into every day life.