

The Danish Emmaus Organization, "Genvej til Udvikling" (GtU = Short Cut to Development) has for all of its lifetime been a participant in the public debate about development matters. In recent years the participation has particularly taken place in form of blog posts on the website www.u-landsnyt.dk, the main Danish website on North-South-questions, regularly read by around 10.000 people.

My African Idol

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Translated into English from Danish by member of GtU, Kristian Katholm Olsen.*

Don't we need to have more focus on Africans with a heart for everyone, and who act visionary?

In 1987 Isidore de Souza (1934-99) worked in the Emmaus community in Montbéliard in France. The companions experienced that a bishop could work physically, and the bishop experienced that solidarity in northern countries can be a hard and dirty work and not just a hand in the pocket.

Shortly after the first two Beninese Emmaus groups were founded. Today you find the biggest development project of the Emmaus Movement in Benin: Clean water is provided to the 70.000 people who live by the strongly polluted Lake of Nokoué or in villages built on wood-sticks out in the lake – and the water-users are organized in administration committees. The African representative in Emmaus International's executive committee is Patrick Atohoun, a disciple of de Souza.¹

In 1988 and 1992 de Souza participated in EI's general assemblies – he is the person (besides Abbé Pierre), that I am most proud of having met.

In 1989 he assisted in the pressure on president Kérékou to call in a national reconciliation conference. De Souza was the chairman – in a country where a head of a religion also enjoys the deepest respect from the followers of the other religions. The congress had participation of all imaginable representatives of civil society, including people, who returned home from exile to stay. During the meeting which lasted several days, de Souza put a big effort in getting all viewpoints expressed, at the same time insisting that the conference should end up into a true democratic development. It did – with himself as a chairman of the National Assembly. This post he had until free elections were held after which he withdraw from political life and became archbishop but still was updated not least in the development of Emmaus as a grass-root player.

Benin has not experienced civil war or war with its neighbors in its 51 years of existence. The country is stuck in poverty, partially because USA's astronomical subsidies to its cotton farmers prevent that Benin receives big foreign currency. Climate catastrophes and corruption do not spare Benin, and trafficking of children is widespread.

But none of these bad things start from religious or ethnical conflicts – the approximately 60 ethnic groups live peacefully with each other.

¹ Was replaced in March 2012.

In the 1999-edition of “Dialogue for democratic development” from the International Institute for Democracy and Support of Elections - the first sentence is... *In memory of Monsignor Isidore de Souza* ... At page 20 the chairwoman of Benin’s Association for Female Lawyers and former Minister of Justice, Grâce d’Almeida Adamon is cited: “The citizen is both a player in democracy and benefits from it ... democracy is built day after day...it is not a finished product, it has to be renewed, built up and consolidated again and again. Democracy is a dynamical process.”

De Souza had thus other disciples than Patrick Atohou. He left lasting marks in his country, and not at least the conference, he directed in 1990, also made an impression to neighboring countries.