 Reading time: 3 min.

Don Bosco International (DBI) is a non-governmental organisation based in Brussels, representing the Salesians of Don Bosco to the institutions of the European Union, with a focus on the protection of children's rights, youth development, and education. Founded in 2014, DBI collaborates with various European partners to promote inclusive social and educational policies, paying attention to vulnerable individuals. The organisation promotes youth participation in policy-making, emphasising the importance of informal education. Through networking and advocacy activities, DBI aims to create synergies with European institutions, civil society organisations, and Salesian networks globally. The guiding values are solidarity, the integral formation of young people and intercultural dialogue. DBI organises seminars, conferences, and European projects aimed at ensuring greater youth presence in decision-making processes, fostering an inclusive environment that supports them in their journey of growth, autonomy and spiritual development, through cultural and educational exchanges. The Executive Secretary, Sara Sechi, explains the activities of this institution.

Advocacy as an act of responsibility for and with our youth

Don Bosco International (DBI) is the organisation that manages the institutional representation of the Salesians of Don Bosco to the European institutions and civil society organisations that revolve around them. DBI's mission is centred on *advocacy*, which can be translated as "political influence", meaning all those actions aimed at influencing a decision-making-legislative process, in our case the European one. The DBI office is based in Brussels and is hosted by the Salesian community of Woluwe-Saint-Lambert (FRB Province). Working in the European capital is dynamic and stimulating. Nevertheless, the proximity of the community allows us to keep the Salesian charism alive in our mission, avoiding getting trapped in the so-called "European bubble", that world of 'privileged' relationships and dynamics often distant from our realities.

DBI's action follows two directions: on the one hand, bringing the Salesian educational-pastoral mission closer to the institutions through the sharing of good practices, youth requests, projects and related results, creating spaces for dialogue and participation for those who traditionally would not have access to them. On the other hand, they deal with bringing the European dimension within the Congregation through monitoring and information on ongoing processes and new initiatives, facilitating new contacts with institutional representatives, NGOs and

confessional organisations that can give rise to new collaborations.

A question that often arises spontaneously is how DBI manages to concretely create political influence. In *advocacy* actions, networking with other organisations or entities that share principles, values, and objectives is fundamental. In this regard, DBI ensures an active presence in alliances, formal and informal, of NGOs or confessional actors who work together on issues dear to Don Bosco's mission: the fight against poverty and social inclusion, the defence of the rights of young people, especially those in vulnerable situations, and integral human development. Whenever a Salesian delegation visits Brussels, we facilitate meetings for them with Members of the European Parliament, Commission officials, diplomatic corps, including the Apostolic Nunciature to the European Union, and other actors of interest. We often manage to meet groups of young people and students from Salesian schools who visit the city, organising a moment of dialogue for them with other youth organisations.

DBI is a service that the Congregation offers to give visibility to its works and bring the voice of those who would otherwise not be heard to institutional forums. The Salesian Congregation has a potential for *advocacy* that is not fully expressed. The presence in 137 countries to protect young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion represents an educational and social network that few organisations can count on. However, it is still difficult to strategically present good results at decision-making tables, where policies and investments are outlined, especially at the international level. For this reason, ensuring a constant dialogue with the institutions represents both an opportunity and an act of responsibility. It is an opportunity because in the long term visibility facilitates contacts, new partnerships, funding for projects and the sustainability of the works. It is also a responsibility because, not being able to remain silent in the face of the difficulties faced by our boys and girls in today's world, political influence is the active testimony of that civic commitment that we often try to generate in young people.

By guaranteeing rights and dignity for young people, Don Bosco was the first actor of political influence of the Congregation, for example through the signing of the first Italian apprenticeship contract. *Advocacy* represents an intrinsic element of the Salesian mission. Salesians do not lack experience, nor success stories, nor concrete and innovative alternatives to face current challenges, but often a cohesion that allows for coordinated networking and clear and shared communication. By giving voice to the authentic testimonies of young people, we can transform challenges into opportunities, creating a lasting impact in society that gives hope for the future.

Sara Sechi
Don Bosco International – DBI, Brussels

Sara Sechi, Executive Secretary of DBI, has been in Brussels for two and a half years. She is the daughter of the Erasmus+ generation, which together with other European programmes has guaranteed her life and training experiences that would otherwise have been denied. She is very grateful to Don Bosco and the Salesian Congregation, where she has found meritocracy, growth, and a second family. And we wish her good and fruitful work for the cause of young people.