L’Arche International:

L’Arche International, a federation for the mentally disabled created more than 50 years ago, now has 146 homes in 36 countries around the world. We need to go back to 1964 to understand where the idea of L’Arche International came from. The story started at a much smaller scale. Jean Vanier, a Canadian philosophy teacher, had a chaplain friend in a psychiatric hospital in France, and during his visits he would notice the presence of both people suffering from mental health problems and those with intellectual deficiencies. He was really surprised, as these persons didn’t have the same needs, and decided to welcome two persons with mental deficiencies to his little country house in France.

Two of his past philosophy students came for a visit and embraced the idea. One did the same in Canada while the other “imported” the idea in India. Thus, only the years after the L’Arche founding in a country house, the idea became international.

As Louis Pilote, communications director of L’Arche International, explained that during the 1960s and 70s, when a new community was established in a country, it was before everything else a living space, a home for those with mental deficiencies. “However, now we are trying to create something more, to have daily activities within these homes, to take care and guide the families and to create partnerships with various local initiatives,” he said.

The activities included within L’Arche include support to families, craft activities, re-education for persons suffering from physical handicaps associated with intellectual disabilities, and educational activities. In some communities, there are even some economical activities, carried out by these persons living in these homes. For example, in one community, located next to a vineyard, they are learning wine professions; in another one, they practice ironwork.

Pilote said it’s really important to understand that from the beginning, Vanier was aware that people with intellectual deficiencies brought something of substance to him, that these homes wouldn’t be merely living spaces but also places of interaction and complementarity. Thus the contribution of the disabled person would be huge. In the end, as Pilote said, “L’Arche isn’t a place of caring but first a place of education on human relations.”

By the way, a lot of young people come to spend a few months or even a year in some communities around the world to work as volunteers.

L’Arche’s 36 countries of operation range from France to Canada and include Australia, Argentina, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. Of course, creating these communities in some countries can be more difficult than in others, as mental deficiencies are not viewed the same way everywhere. In Northern and emerging countries, more and more social politics support the accommodation of people with disabilities. On the other hand, in developing countries, social politics favor “healthy” people, Pilote explained. “We take care of disabilities only once we have the possibility to take care of everything else,” he said, paraphrasing that sentiment.
Culturally too, approaches to mental disabilities can be very different. In some countries, a person with mental health problems can be associated with a curse or as being contagious because of ignorance on the topic. Then there is the task of raising awareness in a region before establishing a community, a home, in these countries. “I remember once when I met a family that didn’t understand that other persons could suffer from the same disabilities in another neighborhood and even less in another country. They were astounded to learn that intellectual deficiency existed in all cultures and societies,” Pilote said. At a global level, 4% or 5% of the world’s population has intellectual deficiencies. Fortunately, however, he said, we meet people everywhere and in every economic situation who are competent to help and whose engagement is extraordinary.

As L’Arche International has become a global network where the feeling of belonging is really strong. Exchanges of pictures or reports are often organized to maintain the link between all these communities. When the people living in the homes in Switzerland heard about the earthquake in Haiti, for example, they were quite affected, as they knew some people living in Port-au-Prince. “They were not directly in touch, but they were all aware that some people live in identical places, homes, as them around the world,” Pilote explained.

In September 2014, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of L’Arche, 36 people from the 36 countries where there are communities met in France, and a web documentary was shot. In this documentary, every person gets to explain what it’s like to live with a disability in their country. The movie is still in production phase but should be out very soon. Other local movies have been shot in 2014 in L’Arche Kenya and Canada. You can have a look at all these videos on the YouTube channel of the organization [here](https://www.youtube.com/user/LArcheInternational). In 2014, as well, an artistic project took place. Hosts from these communities created drawings, every artist explaining what they wanted to express in their work. This art has been observed by critics and people from the art world. You can find much more explanation about the project and all the works of art [here](http://art.larche.org), on the website of L’Arche International. A lot of pictures on the work of L’Arche International are available on its Instagram account:

- Twitter account: @larcheintl
- Instagram account: LARCHEINTERNATIONALE