By Peter Barendse

WHAT IS BEHIND THE PAPERWORK ?

Tips and background ideas for trainers when introducing application forms during courses

The first encounter with an application form often results in a loud scream: "Do I have to fill in all that?!" People start to count the pages and slowly turn pale. For many organisations that want to apply for a grant from the YOUTH programme, filling in the application forms is a big barrier. It is often said that it is time-consuming, too much work and boring.

But what is it, this application form, and why is it important to write down what your plans are and how you are going to achieve your goals?

(While writing this I feel a bit Kafka-ish. Am I really going to write an article about application forms?)

I would like to take a look into the "world of application forms". Why they are there, what happens with them? And how you can learn to fill them out, and even use them for developing your project. What ways are there to train organisations to fill in application forms? Although I am speaking mainly from my own YOUTH programme experience, many of the ideas will apply to other grant application procedures as well, such as that of the European Youth Foundation.

Paperwork phobia

Youth workers often feel that writing reports, applications etc, is not one of their core tasks. Their motivation to start working with young people was to work with young people, not to fill out forms and write reports.

In many countries youth work and other welfare and care activities are more institutionalised. So, in any case, youth workers have to spend part of their time writing, sitting at a desk in front of a computer, explaining what their plans are, and later on, reporting on what they have been doing.

When trying to motivate them it is important to find out what their drive is. What are they motivated by ? And what is their problem with paperwork. Is it the way of "analysing" and determining the different steps? Or is there an aversion to spending time behind a desk. Time that you could have spent doing other things like face-to-face work with young people.

Image

An important aspect when we are motivating people to get started on international youth activities in the YOUTH programme is the way we present it. What is the image of this programme that we are putting across?

• Is it a European programme lasting 7 years with five Actions with a budget of so many millions, and to get some of that you have to fill in a form here and there etc etc etc?

• Or is it a programme which makes it possible for young people to meet other young people from other countries in a joint project around a theme that interests them. And which takes place in a fun atmosphere?

In which kind of programme would you be interested?

Often, when people talk about the YOUTH programme, they start with"formalities", jargon, criteria, forms etc. Because you can only make a first impression once, you have to make it attractive. Make it a good impression! People will remember what they can do with this programme and how they can work with it. **This first impression, this first experience, will influence applicants' perceptions for a long time.**

In the old Youth for Europe and EVS programmes the application forms were more complicated. People and organisations sometimes do have an unusually long collective memory. Which means that there are still people out there with frustrations about the way it was in the past. In the Netherlands there are organisations that "checked out" of YfE at a certain point some years ago, and because of that, have still not joined the YOUTH programme.

And even some new organisations that contact us are afraid of the paperwork, because they have heard that there is this incredible amount of paperwork to do.

With the start of the new YOUTH programme in 2000, the European Commission managed to make project administration simpler and more logical, not least by introducing a system of lump-sum amounts. This way of budgeting at least makes the hated financial paragraph easier to complete.

▶The forms

What are we talking about? What is in these application forms? The application form contains the description of your project. Nothing more, nothing less. There are only things in there that you would need to think about yourself anyway. **But now write them down in a specific order on a specific form:**

Who?	->there are some "Who's" in the form: **who** organises the project? and together with whom do they do that? And: **who** participates?
What?	->is the project about? and **what** are you going to do? **What** does it look like?
Why?	->What is the **reason** for the project? Describe the rationale.
When?	->**When** is the project going to happen? And: **when** are you preparing? When is what happening? What is your schedule?
Where?	->Where?
How?	-> **How** will the project fulfil its aims and objectives? **How** do the methods that you have chosen lead to the realisation of your aims and objectives?

▶Training

Let's turn things around. It is important when thinking about training applicants to fill in an application form that the application itself should not be the goal. It should be: writing down a good project. Which means: having designed a good project.

The first step in training (*and when setting up a project*) should be to have a good idea; the second one to work it out; and after that to design a good project.
I would not like to go too deeply into this, but concerning the first thing, "the idea", it would be interesting to investigate what role "bars" and "free evenings" play in this. Inspiration often comes when talking to the right people in the right atmosphere. People are motivated to talk, to think and to elaborate. There is the idea, and from there the idea should start to develop. To be shaped and formed into something more concrete and real. It is important to think about the many different aspects and components of the project. Project management actually starts here.

To help applicants to identify all the aspects and components of a project, it is useful to split the project into different components and different stages. Knowing why you organise a project, being aware of your own motivation, contributes to the quality of the project. And, interestingly, that is also how application forms are built up! So, using the paragraphs of the application form, or checking your own list of "things to do" with it, will help to create better projects. Because the information that is in these forms is the information that the National Agency, the European Commis-

sion and their selection committees need. And those questions are not that strange. "*Why do you want to organise this project and how are you going to do it?*"

▶The application form as a help in building up your project

A great part of motivating people to cross the barrier lies in "making it useful for them". When people do not see the use of something, they do not do it. So make it useful. And make it something more than: "getting European money for my project".

As mentioned above, one useful aspect of the application form is that it can be seen as a "guide" to what is expected from you and your organisation. And it can be the start of an agreement between you and the National Agency about a project you're carrying out.

This part can be worked out further: it is not only an agreement between you and the National Agency, it is also the idea you have about the project you're going to do. And most of the time with others, with international partners. Sometimes it is amazing to see that two project partners are both applying for YOUTH grants with two completely different application forms. For the same project.

What can we do about it? Should we talk about intercultural misunderstanding here? Language problems between the project partners? At the very least a communication breakdown. Would it have been an idea to prepare the application together? I think it is essential in a project to ensure that all partners know what they are getting into. The application form can be used in communication about the project.

In many training courses offered by the National Agencies, such as SOHO, BITRIMULTI and many other less well-known ones, "project management" and "communication" are important elements. What is your motivation to organise this project? Why are you here doing what you are doing? This leads on to the aims and objectives of the project: what do you want to reach from here? How are you going to communicate with your project partners about it?

When the whole project has been developed, and when the organisation and its project partners know what they are going to do, and when and where and how and with whom, filling in the form can be just a small step. **A youth exchange doesn't start with filling in the application form.**

But then you are sitting at your computer with the form in front of you. Everything is in your head, ready to get on paper. **Try to speak the language of the programme.** In the YOUTH programme, and also in other programmes, a certain jargon has been developed and is used. Be sure that you know what is meant by those specific words and phrases. And if possible "translate" your project into this language. People that you co-operate with, and people who deal with this kind of project throughout the year, will find it easier understand what you mean. If you have prepared your project well, you know how your project fits into the YOUTH programme. You know what your aims are, and what the aims of the YOUTH programme are. Try to make that connection. And try to do that in clear terms. Do not just "copy and paste" from the user's guide, but make use of the language of the YOUTH programme.

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An application form is used by the National Agency, the selection committee and the European Commission to get an idea of a project. To get an insight into what can be achieved with it. To assess the design of the project so far. For National Agency project officers and selection committees it is not something read on a rainy Sunday afternoon. It doesn't have to be literature! Your language may be functional. The text should be clear.

About the length: if there is nothing more to say, then don't say any more. Keep it like it is, (we could borrow from Open Space Technology: when it's over it's over, when it's not over it's not over).

By training and supporting organisations that are in the process of preparing international youth projects, the National Agencies aim to raise the quality of projects. To raise the quality of the applications that are coming in. Therefore, the trainings courses are mainly focused on themes, and rarely on "filling in the application form". If the preparation of projects improves, and competence to carry out an international youth project improves, the projects proposed will do too. Project organisers will be able to explain more clearly what they are doing in their project when they are aware of the way they are working on the major themes, such as intercultural learning, local embedding of the project, anti-racism, and youth participation.
Most National Agencies however, will be ready to support you when you are writing your application. Although I have never written a single word in an application form, in a talk with an applicant it is possible to help make ideas sharper and put thoughts into words.
In this context it is also worth mentioning that, although the National Agency is not actually a project partner, communication and fine tuning with the National Agency can be helpful in writing a successful application. It can give you more of an idea of what is meant with certain parts of the application, or how you should interpret them.

I would like to end here; enough about applications! Let's go back to work and make plans for new projects. And design and prepare them as well as possible. And then... fill in a form.

ABC
to application forms

Administration
The application form is one of the important elements in project administration. It is possible to see from the application what the idea behind the project is, and how it is planned to carry it out. Often it is the first official documentation of a project.

Bureaucracy
The application form will start to go backwards and forwards from one office to another. Project officers, secretaries and selection committees will look at the application form.

Communication
In most cases, a whole range of people are involved in the assessment and selection of a project. The only way to get the same idea about a project is to read the application. It is a prerequisite for communication. Also between the National Agency and the applicant, the application form is an important element. Your project gets a number!

Decision making
So we had to find a way to decide which project we would fund, and which one we wouldn't. Because of the large number of applicants and organisations, it is impossible to talk personally to all the people who want to apply. And of course, there are many people involved in selecting the projects. Sometimes the only thing that the National Agency sees of a project is the paper version.

5 tips for writing an application form

1) Write it on the computer and save it!
2) Explain abbreviations of your org. and other orgs.
3) Speak the language of the YOUTH programme
4) It is not literature
5) Additional information and appendices can be useful but don't overdo it.

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