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About Youth Participation

“Participation” is one of the three main pillars of the “All different - All equal” campaign of the Council of Europe. But Participation in what? For what? For whom?

► What is Participation?

Why do we need Youth Participation and even a Charter on it? Wouldn't life be much easier without asking young people to make choices and give their opinion?

Let's look at some definitions of Youth Participation; maybe we can find some answers...

In the preamble to the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life adopted in May 2003, a document which is gaining more and more importance in the European Youth Sector, it is stated that:

“The active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local and regional level is essential if we are to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies.”

In 1952, T.H Marshall, a British sociologist, defined Participation as follows: *“Participation is a principle of social organisation that cannot be reserved to specific spheres. It is all-embracing and needs to be practised at local, regional, national, European and international (global) level. It also does not allow for any restrictions according to gender, ethnicity, religion, choice of life-style and social status.”*

Furthermore, Marshall defines participation as “*having access to citizenship rights and elections (passive / active), be eligible to citizens’ responsibilities, have freedom of speech and the right to an answer*”. But in his view, it is also about having “*a minimum of decent living conditions, both culturally and socially, and of course materially*”.

Peter Lauritzen, the head of the Council of Europe's Youth department, says in his paper ***"On participation"***: *"In a nutshell participation means to be involved, to have tasks and to share and take over responsibility. It means to have access and to be included."*

If we try to summarize these definitions, we'll get some answers to the question "why do we need Youth Participation and even a Charter on it?". We need it in order:

- to build a more democratic, inclusive and prosperous society
- to recognise a principle of social organisation
- to involve young people and to give them the opportunity
- to share and take over responsibilities
- to give young people access to society and to include them
- to practice several basic Human Rights, such as freedom of speech, the right to answer, the right to...participate!

Is the first question answered? Let's ask ourselves a new one then...

►What does the Council of Europe do on Participation? Does such an organisation only talk about it, or also put it into practice? How does the Council include young people?

To foster participation of young people in public life is part of the Council of Europe's youth policy

mandate. The Council of Europe is working on participation at several levels: mainly within the Directorate of Youth and Sport, but also within the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

Within the Directorate of Youth and Sport, young people are not only considered as spectators, but are actively involved in the decision-making process of the whole youth sector. Through a co-management system, an equal number of young people and governmental representatives decide together on the priorities of the Youth Directorate along with the concrete programme and the budget envelopes. Through this unique decision-making system, it is ensured that participation does not only happen for young people, but also by and with young people.



“I understood that as much as I know about participation as much I can answer to different situations in my society. “

Participant in TC Charter 2006

The co-managed statutory bodies identified Participation as one of the main priorities for the Council of Europe’s Youth Directorate for the period 2006-2008. The youth representatives decided together with the governmental representatives on the following objectives within that priority:

- Promoting and sustaining the role of youth organisations in the development of democratic participation;
- Promoting citizenship education and participation of and by young people;
- Promoting access of young people to decision-making.

On a governmental level, the Council of Europe’s Directorate for Youth and Sport is supporting Youth Participation, through youth policy reviews and the formulation of recommendations to specific countries.

Besides the Directorate of Youth and Sport, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (“the congress”) is working on participation in local and regional life. Its background idea is that “Democracy begins in the towns and villages of Europe. There is no democracy without local democracy.” (Giovanni Di Stasi, Past President of the Congress).

As you can see, a big organisation can do quite a lot, but of course only with the commitment and active participation of NGOs, young people and governments on all levels.

In order to promote participation you need to... participate!!!

► **But how can we promote and practise Youth Participation?**

The European Youth Campaign “all different – all equal”

A first and the most obvious frame is the European Youth Campaign “All different – all equal”. Participation is promoted through it, and many participatory projects have been launched under the umbrella of the campaign.

“I will inform young people on the “All different-all equal” Campaign, I will talk about project management, possibilities to co-operate with foreign partners”

Participant in TC Charter 2006

The revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life

This Charter, developed by the congress and revised together with the co-management structure of the CoE’s Youth sector in 2003, lists and describes in the first part all sectoral policies with which young people are concerned. For example policies to promote youth employment, housing policy, health policy and also a policy for sport, leisure and associative life and a policy on sexuality, just to name a few. The approach of the Charter is that “any policy or action designed to promote youth participation...must also take into account the diverse needs, circumstances and aspirations of young people. And it must also involve some element of fun and enjoyment.”

The second part of the document focuses on instruments for youth participation, such as training courses, information and communication technologies and volunteering. A third part focuses specifically on institutional participation, for example the creation of youth councils, parliaments etc. A user-friendly version of the Charter was published in 2004, and a CD-Rom is on its way, as well as a manual on how to use the Charter in practice.

The Training Courses of the Council of Europe’s Directorate of Youth and Sport

The Youth Directorate organises training courses on Youth Participation and the Charter with participants from all over Europe, from NGO’s as well as from authorities in order to ensure a wide range of experience and a lively exchange.

► **What can you reach with a training course?**

The concrete aim of the 2006 training course was: enhancing youth participation at local, regional and national level across Europe through facilitating the development and implementation of cooperative and innovative projects.

Some of the main objectives defined for the 2006 edition were as follows:

- to introduce and explore the concept of youth
- to provide space for introducing, sharing and further development of participants’ youth participation project
- to share and analyse different local realities and different approaches to work on youth participation
- to introduce the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life
- to enable and motivate participants to use the Charter
- to encourage co-operation between authorities (local, regional and national) and youth workers/youth leaders
- to critically discuss existing strategies and instruments to enhance youth participation
- to draw conclusions relevant to participants’ reality
- to develop further participants’ skills and competences on developing and implementing youth participation projects

- to define relevant follow-up (needs, actions, resources), according to action plans and the level of participants' experience and projects.

35 youth leaders, youth workers, young staff from local authorities from all over Europe were selected for this course on the basis of their existing projects on youth participation and their motivation to work with the Charter and to act as multipliers. During 10 days, they explored the concept of youth participation, identified their needs and the challenges faced when building up a project, analysed how participative their project was, visited local associations or projects to see what youth participation means in practice, and worked on the Charter and how it can be used in their local context.

These training courses have an impact on young people active in the promotion and daily practising of Youth Participation. Of course only 35 participants per training course are directly reached, but all of these 35 people are able, willing and in a position to go back home and to implement the concepts and ideas learned and discussed. So through these "multipliers" we are able to reach indirectly big parts of society also at local and rural levels.

One main outcome of this course was the formulation of recommendations to various actors and decision-makers at local, national and European level. These recommendations were presented to the Vice-President of the Sub-Committee on Youth of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council, and will be used by participants to transmit their ideas at local and National levels.

Strong focus and much energy was put on the follow-up of this course: an online platform was created to enable participants to exchange, to upload the development of their projects and to make sure that the course results and long-term outcomes can be followed up.

During this course, some main challenges to youth participation were identified, which seem to reflect the difficulties young people face in everyday life when it comes to their active involvement in decision-making.

"I have returned from the course determined to be proactive in developing the political links I need to lobby effectively. This has grown largely from recognising that I have the skills to do this but I was allowing my anger with local political injustices to de-skill me. Stepping back from the arena and discussing the issues during the course was a great help as I realised that I had previously been contributing to the problem rather than dealing with it"

Participant in TC Charter 2006

► What makes Youth Participation sometimes so difficult?

Various challenges to youth participation remain omnipresent. The main one encountered by young people is the active cooperation between young people and authorities. Very often, the contact is difficult, young people find themselves not taken seriously, or not consulted about decisions. What authorities often call youth participation is to plan what could be good for young people, without asking them. Mutual prejudices have increased the difficulty to communicate, and both sides are very often not aware of how the other works. Better communication strategies and more involvement of local authorities in youth NGO meetings or activities, were possible solutions presented by participants.

Another identified challenge remains the lack of support that young people face, both from a financial and a structural perspective. Youth organisations are not always trained in funding and fundraising, lobbying and other useful skills for getting support.

Finally, the main problem remains a certain level of tokenism. Symbolically, governments are concerned about youth participation, but the role given to young people very often remains the role of spectator. The reflex of consulting young people when it comes to youth policies or decisions that do concern young people is often still absent.

"Personally this course gave me motivation to be more active in the youth field even if you are lacking some financial or technical resources"

Participant in TC Charter 2006

► So what can we do in practice?

TC Charter 2006 gave emphasis to the development of concrete project plans by participants. Through the developed internet platform, some of the project developments could be followed until now. We would like to present here a couple of examples of "good practice" along with some feedback from the training course as motivation for others. Numerous other examples are available on request.

What we call good practice is not a perfect project without any difficulties. It is rather a realistic approach to dealing with challenges when developing a project and trying to come up with solutions. Sometimes failed projects can also serve to provide some valuable learning.

Kaja, Estonia: International youth exchange

Aim :

To exchange experiences and best practice in order to find new ideas on how to increase youth participation in the community: to give young people (age 14-18) information and experiences about their right to participate in decision-making processes.

Main results :

- Youngsters are writing new projects for this winter, next spring and summer on different themes (they themselves created the ideas about what they want to do).
- Youngsters also visit(ed) each other in their countries

Main quote :

"After this successful project, my organisation took children's participation as a main focus: from next year onwards one person from the organisation will be exclusively working on this area. We also contacted some ministries about what kind of material we need to translate in order to promote children's participation and with cooperation of our partners we would like to improve children's parliament."

Pete, UK: establishment of a Social Club

Aim :

To enable young people to take a "hands-on" approach in the management and running of the Club (UK).

Main instruments :

- Shadowing of a local politician who is developing a new policy aimed at enabling social housing tenants to participate in the decision-making processes affecting their tenancies.
- Joining the Steering Group to develop the next city-wide conference for youth workers organised by the local authority.

Main quote :

"TC charter inspired me to take a fresh look at the way of relating to the local government."



► Upcoming events/activities

Many upcoming activities or events related to Participation are linked to the All Different-All Equal Campaign:

Besides the upcoming events mentioned in other articles of this Coyote issue, all study sessions held at the DYS for 2006/2007 are linked to the three topics of the Campaign. Therefore, various study sessions organised by youth organisations within the DYS are directly related to the topic of youth participation.

Other events or documents are directly related to the Charter itself :

- CD-Rom on the Charter: the CD Rom includes the plain version of the Charter in 4 languages and is presented in a more interactive way.
- Manual on how to use the Charter (2007): This publication will provide some guidelines and inspirations to those who are interested in implementing the principles and tools mentioned in the Charter. It will be addressed to young people, youth organisations and local authorities.
- TC Charter 3, (23-31 March 2007): This will be another training course like the one described above.
- Evaluation of the three training courses on the Charter (2008): In order to measure the impact of these training courses on young people and to think of the format of future courses, an overall evaluation of TC Charter 1-3 is planned.

Notes and references :



- Revised charter on youth participation, May 2003: http://www.coe.int/t/e/cultural_co-operation/youth/2._Priorities/participation.asp#TopOfPage
- The quotes from TH Marshall and Peter Lauritzen came from an input on Participation by Peter at the TC Charter 2006. The full Marshall reference has not been found. If any reader can enlighten us then we would be happy to acknowledge this in a future edition of Coyote.
- Like wise we have been unable to find the precise source of the quote from Giovanni Di Stasi

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