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A history of youth work in Armenia

Introduction

Like many former constituent members of the Soviet Union, Armenia lacks both youth work history and a history of state-controlled and institutionalised (and instrumentalised) work with young people in their leisure time that may only rather misguidedly be referred to as "youth work". Other histories of youth work may elect to start in those days, but this history has opted to start during the 1990s, when, after some struggles and tragedies, Armenia was in a position of democratic self-determination and decision making. Civil society and more participative public services were, even then (and, arguably, still are today), in an embryonic state. Seventy years of state socialism had stripped people of a capacity to think and plan for themselves and, in youth work as in a range of other provisions in youth policy and beyond, Armenia sought ideas and advice from elsewhere, though it was rarely clear where to turn when the thoughts and perspectives of others derived from very different cultural, political, economic and social traditions. Nevertheless, the idea of "youth work" took root following a concept paper produced around 1996 for a workshop with the title "Youth work is the working part of youth policy".

The wider context

Even after the end of the Soviet period, Armenia – literally – faced a dark age. As *glasnost* and *perestroika* heralded the end of the USSR, the earthquake of 1988 resulted in many fatalities in Armenia. The war with Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh led to the displacement and exodus of Armenians from that territory and the rest of Azerbaijan as well as the departure of virtually all Azerbaijanis from Armenia. Armenia, a country of three million people, but with a diaspora worldwide around double that size, also experienced mass emigration. There were wild economic transformations and fluctuations that at one point led to the rationing of electricity to two hours a day and of bread to 400 grams a day. The French-Armenian expatriate superstar Charles Aznavour subsidised electricity in Armenia in these dark days when, for two years in the early 1990s, there was an economic blockade that only allowed the passage of goods and services through neighbouring Georgia. Young people saw little future for themselves in Armenia. The old Soviet system of "youth work" had, predictably, broken down, and the question was whether or not new hope, optimism and possibility might be resurrected through the youth sector in this context of gloom, poverty and despair.

Former times

Figure 2. Examples of propaganda posters

Author's translations:
Top row, left to right: "Don't talk too much!"; "No"; "Mothers of the planet for peace!"
Bottom row, left to right: "We are friendly, creative and we strengthen peace in space!"; "Humane relations and mutual respect among people: a man is a friend, comrade and brother to a man!"; "People and Army are united!"

Within the Soviet Union there was, without doubt, a strong infrastructure for communist youth work. There had been well-defined methodologies, a well-structured set of activities, specialists in the delivery of "youth work", and a clear ideological commitment that underpinned this practice. The cultural unification, and "Russification", of all corners of the USSR was clearly one of the central objectives of Soviet youth work, which promoted particular values, international co-operation (limited to the so-called "Socialist camp" countries) and links with other sectors of youth lives and youth transitions.

Though there is clearly no cause whatsoever to celebrate those days, the conceptual framework for "youth work" – structures, methods, leadership, values, internationalism, connections – may not be something to get rid of wholesale. The rejection of these ideas because of their association with former times, in Armenia and no doubt also in other former Soviet countries, has produced the risk of losing them forever. But the post-Soviet era in Armenia has witnessed an attempt by a small and under-resourced youth sector to try to recover the framework in order to build more relevant and appropriate content within it.

Of course, it was not just rejection of ideology and methodology. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, something also had to be done about the huge infrastructure of youth provision – buildings, Pioneer camps, youth centres – that belonged to Komsomol, the Communist Youth League. Much of this simply disappeared into private hands or was actively privatised, but some was transferred to the Armenian Apostolic Church, becoming part of church structures for youth provision.

The post-Soviet period

There was a slow start to the emergence of youth (student) organisations in the early 1990s. Though some did form, there was little in the way of resources to support their sustainability. Structures were largely sustained through voluntary work and the high energy of small numbers of young people who were committed to the democratic development of a youth sector. Indeed, for that reason and because of a belief in accountability, following institutional attempts at regulation and control, the first President of Yerevan State University's Student Council resigned in the early 1990s. Around the same time, rather less independent, state-initiated and sponsored youth bodies were formed as part of the start of a very active national process to consolidate the alignment of youth with the country's priorities. These included the Republican Student Council and the National Youth Council. In contrast, a variety of student bodies also emerged with rather greater levels of independence.

In parallel with the emergence and growth of student organisations, and in part emerging from them, were dedicated youth NGOs such as Young Armenia, which was formed in 1995. These generally had no resources but a great deal of creativity, and they existed through voluntary commitment. There were very rare sources of funding for youth NGO activities, such as the Soros Foundation, the Eurasia Foundation and some programmes supported by the United States Agency of International Development (such as the NGO centre in Yerevan). The competition for such scarce resources was intense.

Youth NGOs started to engage in networking and the creation of umbrella bodies. Such collaborative engagement heralded the emergence of a national

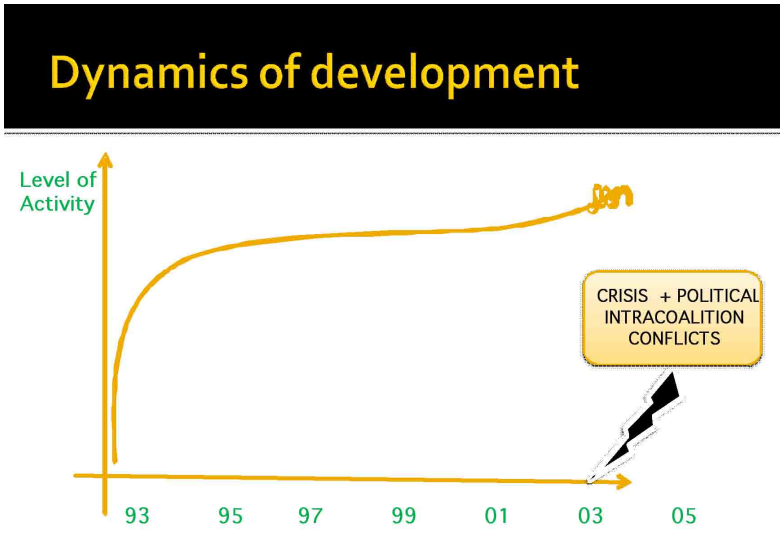
youth policy sector which, in turn, led to co-operation with European institutions of relevance to the youth field: the European Youth Forum and the Council of Europe Youth Directorate. At national level within Armenia, there was strong political lobbying by the youth NGOs and student sectors for the creation of a post of Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs and a separate budget for youth affairs, but below the national level – in the regions and at local level – progress in the youth field remained undeveloped.

A sharp learning and development curve: into the new millennium

This twin-tracked groundwork – within student organisations and other youth NGOs – produced the foundation for significant development in the late 1990s and the 2000s. Student organisations became more professionalised, securing more stable funding, leading to more competition for posts within them. Though many student organisations still lacked full independence and were often university controlled, they realised a range of projects and programmes.

Similarly, a significant number of healthy and strong youth NGOs sprang up in the regions, bolstered by resources from international donor organisations and some limited state support for projects developed and delivered by youth NGOs. A government-sponsored grant system supporting youth NGO activities was launched in the late 1990s, assisting these developments. However, such overall development contributed to greater competition among youth NGOs and the fragmentation of co-operation; as youth organisations became more politicised and polarised, reflecting the broader situation in Armenian society, the national coherence of the youth field was undermined. Only the activism in the youth field by the Armenian Apostolic Church sustained grounded youth provision, building paradoxically on the communist legacy, as we have noted above, through Houses of Young Armenians, cultural centres and youth camps.

Figure 3 – Dynamics of development



Youth policy and youth work development therefore flattened out during the 2000s, culminating in serious pressures on the field on account of both economic crises and political conflicts. Nevertheless, some serious youth policy reform initiatives did start again, with the development and production of the National Youth Report of Armenia and the Council of Europe's international review of Armenia's national youth policy, which took place in 2006. The momentum and political commitment that this produced was, however, difficult to sustain. Though Armenia may now be well connected with relevant bodies within European institutions, such as the intergovernmental steering group for youth (CDEJ) and the Advisory Council (representatives of youth organisations) of the Council of Europe, and part of the European Union's neighbourhood strategy, the future of its youth field now looks, in many respects, as precarious as it was some years ago.

But all is not (yet) lost

Notwithstanding the loss of momentum in the development of youth work and youth activity, there are pockets, or perhaps islands, where important elements of youth policy still have considerable strength. There is a strong political commitment to sports and healthy lifestyles as a policy priority and though much of this currently remains on paper, some practical measures are about to start. Co-management approaches to youth policy, adopted long ago within the Council of Europe Youth Directorate (now the Youth Department of the Directorate of Democratic Participation and Citizenship) but rarely evident in national youth policies, have been introduced through a new format for the Council on Youth Affairs under the prime minister in 2010. There are activities aimed at strengthening and relaunching a transparent online system for applications and the distribution of grants to youth NGOs, which was established in 2010 and stopped for the second half of 2011. Beyond the activities of the Church (see above), political parties in Armenia now have youth wings that command a significant level of resources. And there are a lot of good specialists in the youth field, including expertise in non-formal education, who work both in Armenia and on an international level. The challenge remains, however, in bringing such disparate strengths together to establish greater coherence within the youth field in Armenia.

Moreover, beyond the formal structures, there is a groundswell of youth activism quite independent of the traditions that have been described. There is a (possibly growing) population of young people who hate the structured methodologies of youth NGOs and student organisations, and who are equally hostile to official programmes and systems. Increasingly, such young people work together – through social networking platforms and other methods – on tactical issues (one recent example was a campaign to save Teghut Forest), though they are not yet connected in order to achieve more strategic objectives.

Challenges for the future in the context of Armenia

There is a range of issues that continue to obstruct and jeopardise the effective development of youth policy generally and youth work practice in particular. The most overriding is the huge implementation gap between legislative and

documentary proclamations and the more grounded realities. Those who are stakeholders in youth NGOs often experience a sense of hollow victory when the securing of apparent development in the youth field fails to produce any material change. While there can be significant benefits in securing political attention on youth issues, a second major concern in Armenia is that the politicisation of youth policy has started to affect the implementation of governmental youth programmes. Very recently, for example, for six months in 2011, the work of the newly established online grants system and virtually the whole package of state programmes for young people grounded to a halt as a result of conflicts within the ruling coalition government.

Youth schemes and programmes at the community level remain very weak, though more are being established. They are, however, often unstable on account of precarious funding sources. Even the funding at national level that is available for youth policy initiatives is routinely considered to be mismanaged. The sums are not, of themselves, inconsiderable for a country the size of Armenia. In 2010 the youth budget was €540 000, there was a budget of €140 000 for grants to youth NGOs, and there was more than €1 million in the All-Armenian Youth Fund, which mainly supports student programmes. Yet, allegedly, there is a low level of transparency in the mechanisms by which these funds are allocated and an equally unclear process for monitoring expenditure and activity. Indeed, monitoring of youth policy generally, though clearly set out in the Armenian Youth Strategy, is according to most commentators never carried out.

Youth information is central in dialogue concerning access to youth and wider provision, but Armenia continues to suffer from weak youth information programmes, notwithstanding efforts once made by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour to produce a youth newsletter. A Youth Information Portal was also once established but, currently, is no longer operational; its development was halted and now only an online youth magazine continues to be produced (www.youth.am). Until relatively recently, the primary source of information for young Armenians was still state-controlled television, but there is little doubt that there have been transformations in the information society, notably with the Internet and social networking sites. These have not, however, been suitably taken into account in the formulation and implementation of youth policy and practice.

There is, generally, a low level of youth involvement in the social sector. This may be, possibly, a sustained legacy of state socialism – it has been argued that a major youth policy challenge for Armenia more than many other countries is to reverse a culture of dependency and an expectation that services will be provided. It may also be the consequence of the fact that young people are often struggling to find the space to learn and earn; though per capita incomes remain very low, a very high proportion of young people in Armenia are engaged in higher education of one kind or another. Those young people who do make a voluntary contribution usually do so out of personal commitment or because it is simply a pragmatic, and relatively costless, way of using time.

Conclusion

The history of youth work and youth development in Armenia is, in many respects, a non-history. If it is a history, it is a short one. There is not a great deal to say.

As Armenia looked westward, in order to engage with "Europe" following the demise of the Soviet Union, it did embrace some of the ideas from democratic western Europe without completely abandoning the framework of ideas from totalitarian state socialism that had previously informed work with young people in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia. But that legacy was patchy and it was, ironically, exploited primarily by the Church. The new youth organisations that sought to emulate youth policy and practice concepts from western Europe were often stymied by a lack of resources or by co-option and institutionalisation by the state. It is perhaps worth ending with a lengthy quotation that concludes the Council of Europe international review of Armenia's youth policy:

Even though Armenia has now endorsed its State Youth Policy Strategy, the debate on youth policy is in many ways just starting. It is a debate that needs to be taken beyond a political and professional "inner circle", though this has driven policy and practice so far. It is a debate that needs to pull together the many strands of existing youth policy, which are currently being delivered by a disparate group of players, and to knock them into a more coherent and structured form, that is realisable with the resources that are currently or prospectively available. And it is a debate that needs to establish the desired balance and interaction between an affirmative position that is characteristic of traditional Armenia and an anticipatory position that relates to the aspirations for an Armenia in the future. (Sipos et al. 2009:68)

Armenia continues to struggle to break free from the legacies of its communist past; state control and centralised bureaucracy may still squeeze the life-blood out of youth organisations that engage with the nation's agenda, while more independent-minded youth organisations regularly find themselves marginalised and starved of resources and other support. Yet there are glimpses of a third pillar of youth policy and youth work development in Armenia. Not yet strategically coherent, young people who are making use of social media for single-issue campaigns and personal communication may come to be the vanguard for new forms of democratic and collaborative youth policy and youth work in a country that is still too stifled by a sometimes troubled and often tragic past.

References

Sipos J. et al. (2007), *Youth policy in Armenia: An international perspective*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.