



by Agnieszka Pawlik

Under European Light: Polish short cut and bypass phenomena. How to create an environment for youth participation?

Before I share my experience on creating a participation environment for youth in Poland, it is important to get a basic view of the Polish youth work reality.

► Poland before the EU Programmes and other funds for youth work arrived

Before the EU programmes arrived there were only big organisations like the Scouts, Christian or Students' Associations whose offer is quite specific. There were also cultural or community houses with some courses available for young people. There were no youth councils; politicians didn't take much notice of youth problems; there was no youth work as a profession and small youth associations didn't exist. Young Gosia or Grześ could join only the Scouts, a Catholic youth group in the parish or attend piano lessons in the culture house.

► Poland now

The "Youth Programme" brought tools: money and know-how for those who wanted to create a new space for youth. We learned from Western experienced youth workers, we became equipped with new clear values and guidance and got the power: funds which we could independently obtain for our ideas. And who are we? People of different ages, professions and assignments, working voluntarily or earning a living in this way, but very often not prepared by any state education to do youth work. So, youth work exists where there are willing people. And most often the youth workers are peers or other young people not much older than the groups they are working with.

I call what happened, the **short cut phenomenon**. Youth work was created earlier than will appear in state educational curricula. There is still no clearly defined profession of "youth worker" in Poland, but hundreds or thousands of them are working in the communities.

► Youth participation in Poland

If we understand youth active participation as young people influencing and changing the reality they're living in, or youth and adults sharing decision-making, there is another difference to the West. In a country such as Poland, where even though state youth policy was never implemented (although created under European influence), great youth actions happen. Young people are solving those problems which were solved a long time ago in the West; problems that are usually the responsibility of the state or local administrations. Examples of projects done by our 17, 20 or 23 year olds are: first socially integrative workshops for young disabled persons (many of them are staying home without any social integration opportunities, not to mention occupational therapy); organising winter holidays for children from poor families (who otherwise would stay only at home); building benches in the public park; building a basketball pitch in a local school yard (and they can use it after school hours).





So, our participation is not about creating embedded and functional systems within the society yet. It's more about creating a space for young people to act and to learn independence; even more, just spend free time together providing self-organised actions for peers, children, the wider community, the environment or cultural heritage.

I call it a **bypass phenomenon**: thanks to the "Youth" and other programmes young people don't need to struggle with some backward politicians to make a change. Young leaders are trained within these programmes, equipped with good values, guidance, practical know-how and money to realize their ideas independently. Young people, supported by a leader or youth worker, want to show up in the community as valuable members, having their culture and needs but also ideas and power. They may be useful and they may be ahead of political processes and decisions. It is more about participation in society and the local community than in decision-making yet.

► **What is needed then to make youth participation in the community sustainable?**

In the macro dimension change in the culture of the society is needed; so that young people can freely express themselves, organise their initiatives whenever they want (e.g. public resources are shared), that young adults' decision-making process is natural, and youth can consider society as their space as well. I don't know such a society so I'm not able to give any practical advice.

I can talk only about the micro dimension, where there are persons who use their elbows to gain some space for youth and protect it later on from dangers of the macro dimension (rude politicians, criticising parents etc.). Many of the great grass roots youth initiatives emerged and disappeared just after one social action or two projects. For instance it is very difficult to establish your own association in Poland: you need at least 15 members and strong nerves to go through the legal registration in the court, and then to manage the book keeping according to Polish financial law.

Good practice: participation in society through action

SA_D means Semper Avanti Długoleka (always ahead Długoleka) and Długoleka is a village commune close to Wrocław city. Youth from over a dozen villages meet regularly every Friday to be together and to see what else they can do in the commune, to make it a better space. Their activities very often have an international/European dimension. The oldest person is their leader Waldek, 26, the youngest is 14. There are already three generations of youths who went through SA_D and this experience strengthened their feeling of belonging, which resulted in them having a feeling of citizenship of the commune or Europe. The list of their actions is very long. It includes: numerous trips and indoor activities for children from less privileged families; charity Christmas actions; participation in all commune events by, for instance, setting up a face and body painting stand for children; construction of benches in the public park during an international youth exchange; public park cleaning; St. John's Night events; open common football watching on a big screen; water fights (one of our Easter traditions); integration workshops for youth with disabilities; street ball inter-village competition (for that they built new basketball pitch in the school yard); numerous international youth exchanges...

Good practice: participation in decision-making

In Dzierżonów very efficient and remarkable actions happened in 2007 that broke the youth isolation for a while or maybe for longer. It was the Open Space Technology conference titled: "You Can Also Decide!" Over one hundred youth representatives and decision-makers from the county met to discuss how to improve public spaces for youth. As a result the city and county councils financed the establishment of the Youth Information Point "Eurodesk" as not only an information provider but also as a base for youth initiatives. Among other outcomes a breakdance group got space to practise in a school building, moreover, a proposal of free breakdance workshops for children from one neighbourhood was accepted. Prices of the bus tickets in the area were discussed; youths were invited to the council's meetings; the existing youth council became more powerful; a conference about the job market and vocational education for youth was organised with employers, etc.



► So what do we need?

1. THE person: a leader, an idealist who will stay with youth for good and bad times and catalyse, making things happen. There are young people almost everywhere; the YOUTH programme and other funds are available for everyone, but the actions happen and are followed-up only in some places. I would like to introduce two persons I am working with closely. They are very different from each other in terms of generations, areas of living and life situations, but they both have caused intensive and sustainable participation results in their communities.

Waldemar Pawlik (known also as Waldek or Valdi) at 26 he is my younger brother by 8 years. He completed Technical University and he earns a nice living in the private sector... But in his free time he is a leader of a youth club SA_D, co-founder of a youth football club, board member of Semper Avanti association and active community member. He dedicates his free time to make young people believe that they can cause positive changes in their environment, and that they will become proud citizens of today's Europe.

Another of my heroes is Grazyna Wójcik, a clerk in the Dzieżoniów County administration, head of an office. Youth work is not her job responsibility at all. She has enough duties and responsibilities to work overtime. But her office almost every day is visited by young people and they are planning future actions together, sharing and creating ideas. Grazyna managed to convince county and city politicians and administrators to put up money and resources to establish a Youth Information Point "Eurodesk" the first in the area, as a base for youth activity. Her actions are very innovative in the scale of the region and Poland, and facing many obstacles and discouragements she keeps on creating new and innovative spaces for youth.

Choosing them I would like to show that so far a youth worker's certificate is not needed (even impossible to get one) but personal motivation and certain life situations allow these persons to do the job for at least a couple of years.

To sum up THE person needs to be:

- an idealist with very good understanding of young people, having good contact and relationships with them, with strong motivation and certain leadership and interpersonal skills,
- with a stable life situation in terms of not changing their place of living,
- with stable incomes, or active enough to earn a living away from youth work.

2. THE tools

Waldemar calls it an offer; I would call it a frame or space. The frame has to match the interests of young people. Usually it has to provide personal development and clear achievement opportunities, for others to create a feeling of belonging to the group or community, or just the possibility of international contacts, travel and meeting peers from other countries.

For me the perfect tools, as I mentioned before, are EU and other programmes suited for youth. These programmes are giving frames (young people often need frames), guidance

and money. But some young people are also able to create their own tools by having their own guidance and own ways to find funds and resources for their activities in society.

3. A base

By a base I understand a place to meet and work and keep group belongings safely, ideally equipped with computers with internet.

SA_D is located in the Community Cultural Centre. They have their own room as an acknowledgement of their value in the community. At the start they were meeting for three years in my parents' house and in the bar. To have their own space now at their disposal is a sign of partnership, which they appreciate and don't want to lose. So they keep on going.

Grazyna adds a legal frame, as she wants to secure her youth activities also from this side. She deals with legal issues and her young people don't need to waste energy for that. She created the Youth Information Point not only to provide information, but also to take over those processes that slow down young people or even paralyse their potential.

SA_D doesn't need their own legal status and don't have to struggle with financial annual formalities for instance, where professional accountancy knowledge is necessary. They apply for funds through other organisations with whom they cooperate.

Grazyna underlines that young people need to see the results, either of their actions or consultations and this is what the base should provide as well. And here I want to emphasise one young adults' problem: young people's life is changing much quicker than adults', that's why they have another sense of time. It is not that they are impatient, as adults often blame them for being. That's why cooperation is sometimes more difficult because adults have their procedures, habits, regulations and rules. That's why it's easy to de-motivate youth if they have to wait too long.





▶ **What about the wider environment?**

It's good if at least it doesn't disturb. In our country all that is happening is new to many people. Parents are checking if we are not a religious sect. Politicians are either looking at us as a danger to their position, competition for community budgets against their interests or first they give help and then demand payback during election campaigns. Luckily more and more we meet great understanding and help from the environment.

▶ **What do we do to warm up the environment towards youth initiatives?**

First of all the main obstacle is always time. To organise an action and take proper care of a young team and participants usually take all our human resources and private time. Time is in the shortest supply out of all goods. What works is:

- for the community: showing as much as possible at public community events the results of youth activities; visibility (T-shirts, logo, group symbols etc.),
- for parents: organising meetings with parents which would assist projects (in the beginning and as evaluation), providing proper written information about the project ,
- for all: always invite press for actions and collect articles in folders in order to show it later on any occasions when the youth action credibility needs to be proven; nice website, leaflets,
- for potential donors and sponsors: eye-catching and informative annual report, attractive project presentation and project reports, good exposition of their logos ,
- for politicians: individual approach by the leaders.

There was another phenomenon regarding the wider environment's acceptance of increased youth activity: European money. Young people were obtaining significant funds from outside and bringing them to the community. "If Europe trusts them - why shouldn't we then?" And our youth started being observed more closely; sometimes with disbelief at first, but their credibility was rising. And then "If Europe gives money for that, maybe it is important?" And another process of looking upon the causes and noticing new values had happened.

Other points of view

I remember once a discussion with Danish young leaders while planning international work camps. Austrians proposed to clean the park, Slovaks to renovate a building for a youth club, Italians proposed digging fire-breaks on the fields, Polish bringing up St. John's traditions, Danes couldn't come up with any idea for a youth contribution to the community. They said: for us all of that is done by the state. That's why I am aware my experience on supporting participation is not very useful in some other countries.

Where is the way then? I am one of the promoters of youth policy in my region (Lower Silesia- Dolny Slask). My boyfriend, who is a liberal economist, undermines a sense of creating such a policy at all. He says that such a policy and our work in general is a result of insufficiencies in other policies, for instance social policy (which has led to the accusation that families don't bring up their kids properly) and educational (that schools only teach and don't bring up) or economic policy and media (promotion of the consumption culture but not empathy for instance). According to him the way is not to create more policies or more bodies to improve the society, but to improve the existing ones.

Last but not least: today I was singing to my little son songs from the Jesus Christ Superstar Musical. Jesus sings to Judas: "There will be poor always, pathetically struggling". Is it not same with youth participation? It is to be hoped, that more and more people like us can create nice and warm islands in the society as a common space for all generations. ■

End note: *I expressed my own point of view here and will be grateful if you share with me*

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