

How can one ENTER the land of social rights?



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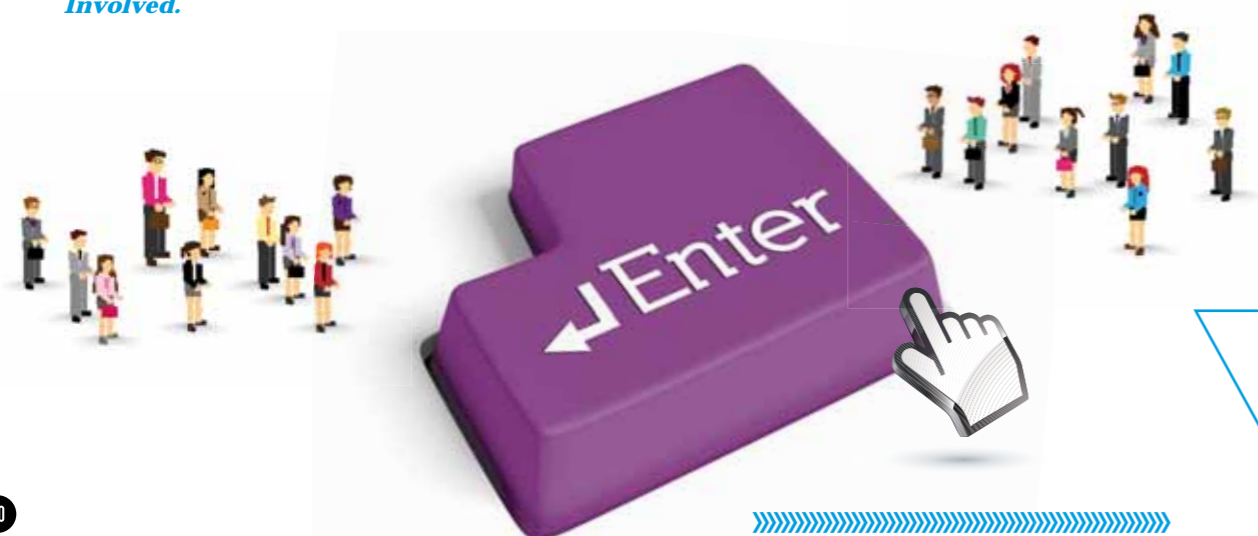
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An article on social rights is not something one would be looking forward to writing. Or reading for that matter. Clearly, the realisation of social rights – just as of all human rights – is at stake in moments of economic crisis. And what many countries in Europe and beyond are facing tends to be a generalised and here-to-last form of crisis. One could almost believe that this is the default setting of our very society.

But good news! This article wants to give an example of how something can be done and how long-term work on social rights and social inclusion is, either from the youth policy or from the youth work perspective, a must. In addition, we very humbly asked young people what they identify as problems and where the solutions could be. Not surprisingly, their input confirms that most of the time those who are suffering the most are, if suitable conditions are provided, the ones who can best identify solutions. At the same time, they need to be taken seriously. Empowered. Supported. Involved.



ENTER! A PROJECT ON ACCESS TO SOCIAL RIGHTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBOURHOODS

In 2009, the youth sector of the Council of Europe started the Enter! project with the aim of sharing experiences and developing innovative and effective youth work and youth policy responses to exclusion, discrimination and violence affecting young people in multicultural, disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The project used the approaches of non-formal learning and training of youth workers in order to explore ways of responding to challenges faced by young people and youth work institutions.

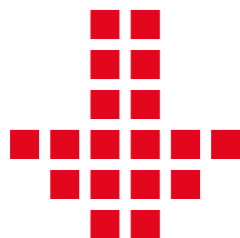
Enter! has combined different types of activities and youth interventions which, while rooted in the realities of young people and based on youth work practice, sought to influence youth policies in Europe from local to national levels. Among the key activities there was a long-term training course (LTTC) for youth workers, several expert seminars, local youth projects as well as the development of a youth policy recommendation and educational tools for access to social rights.

In April 2012, a meeting was organised in order to evaluate Enter!, so as to look back at achievements and shortcomings, in view of planning for the future. The meeting gathered 30 participants with different roles and functions during the project: participants in the activities, particularly in the LTTC; trainers or facilitators; researchers on social rights and social exclusion and policy makers involved in policy development.

Some lessons we can easily draw from this meeting are of particular relevance for the way ahead.

- The Enter! project developed a lot of knowledge, expertise and a model of interventions on access to social rights for young people. This needs to be acknowledged, celebrated and used for future processes!
- The participation aspect of the project: engaging young people in the policy making and the development of a policy recommendation was an ambitious process, and needs to be continued and strengthened. It is important to involve young people directly! Nothing for them without them!

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Young people and youth workers involved in the project developed competences that otherwise would have been very difficult to acquire or improve. Learning about rights is a first step to empowerment and Enter! helped participants make progress on this. The recognition of these competences and of the youth work intervention on access to social rights needs to be strengthened through appropriate strategies at all levels.

The training course for youth workers was a key activity in Enter! and should be continued and supported, especially in its relation to other interventions, such as policy making and local youth projects. Using a rights-based approach for social inclusion in the area of training multipliers remains, in the eyes of the participants in the evaluation meeting, a key feature for the future!

There is a need now to focus on the interventions in the follow-up to the Enter! project. Specific focal points are to be sought within the social human rights framework. Research needs to become more engaged in the process as well.

There is a need to move outside the youth work context and engage with local, regional and national authorities. Most decisions on social rights are taking place at these levels and youth work needs to enter into a dialogue with these structures. The word dialogue here is key, as often the problematic situations are also due to the dependency of youth work on political will to reach out to young people who face the most severe problems in accessing their rights. Support from the European level in this process should also be sought.

Monitoring progress on social rights should be, in the new project following Enter!, a key dimension, in order to make the policy recommendation a known reality and a tool for advocacy for youth work and youth organisations.

Use the rights-based approaches more often and more consistently! It is relevant now to also engage more partners from youth organisations whose main mission may not necessarily be only linked with social rights. Engaging with national youth councils, for instance, is very important. As one participant said in the meeting, we need to speak out to others, because we really need everyone in this process!

The next step in the follow-up to the project is to set up a new long-term training course for youth workers! Stay tuned on the Enter! website for more information to come soon: www.coe.int/enter.



WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH WORKERS SAY?

A series of interviews was done in the framework of the follow-up to the Enter! project on access to social rights for young people. Some of those interviewed have participated in the project, others have not but are either youth workers or young people confronted with the problem of access to social rights for young people.

It is worth noting that a couple of observations are similar, either from participants or not, or expressed by young people and also youth workers. One of them is the lack of knowledge on the part of young people themselves about their rights. This links automatically to the issue of the information available or given to them. Another common issue is the fact that, as answers from young people and youth workers tend to show, policy makers see young people as a problem and not as a resource, especially if they come from specific neighbourhoods, or with a difficult school past.

Young people are not recognised as a value, and sometimes this comforts them in a negative attitude: "It is useless, they will not listen to me." Hence some declarations or observations that services, and in particular social services, are unsuitable or inaccessible to the reality of these young people. They are not at all "youth-user friendly"; they are complicated and sometimes also contradictory in their criteria.

From the point of view of the youth workers, they clearly see their support and assistance role as

crucial in the process of helping the young people to know and to fight for their social rights. They also acknowledge the utmost importance of networking with other actors in the youth or social sectors. They are the ones who can listen and be recognised as "friendly" in the eyes of young people. So, the training of youth and social workers is considered as essential in this process.

As far as participation in Enter! is concerned, everyone considered it to be a wonderful experience.

Lysiane talked about personal and professional enrichment, but also as a way of taking a step back and reflecting on her practice and on the policies developed in her city.

On the young participants' side, they are happy to have been given opportunities to express themselves, to meet other young people but also to have been "accepted" and listened to by an international structure. They were at the centre of interest, which is not often the case in their daily lives.

They have learned new things, things that you don't learn in school. Their way of thinking has been positively affected.

They have made wonderful contacts, too.

As they say, this experience was of "enormous value", was "irreplaceable" and it is difficult to talk about it: "YOU HAVE TO LIVE IT."

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SOME QUOTES

“This project allowed me to discover Europe through the meetings with youngsters from other countries. We exchanged and discussed our problems, our difficulties, our experiences. Thanks to this project, I had the feeling the Council of Europe really got interested in our issues.” (young participant in the Enter! youth meeting)

“Through this project I managed to make a difference between what I learn in school and what I can learn in the real life.” (young person)

... for Bachir, a youngster living in Brussels, the problems are...

- ⇒ language barriers;
- ⇒ extremely long procedures, for example in the access to health care, often with no serious follow-up of the requests by the state services;
- ⇒ lack of trust in the services, especially for the youngsters without regular papers;
- ⇒ not enough personnel working in the services related to social rights, so bad communication;
- ⇒ different treatment according to where you live in the city, the rules are not the same for all;
- ⇒ young people cannot even physically access these services: for example, a young person without regular papers cannot take the bus because of the risks;
- ⇒ policies are not always clear and do not make sense: sometimes to have access to social aid you need to have a regular rental contract.

... for Bilal, a youth worker in Brussels, the problems are:

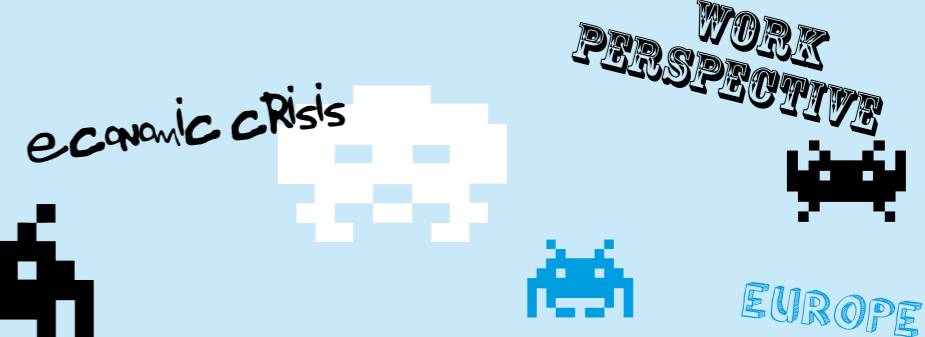
- ⇒ the bad self-image young people have. Even before kicking something off, they think it will not work out, it will be too difficult, there is no chance to do anything;
- ⇒ Islamophobia;
- ⇒ in their daily lives, rights mean little. As a young person was saying, we only have the right to hand over our ID.

... and the solutions should be the same procedures for everyone;

- ⇒ more interpreters;
- ⇒ training for professionals to accompany youngsters in their access to services;
- ⇒ more competent personnel;
- ⇒ more organisations and more trust between organisations and young people! For example during events a dialogue can start with young people, and social workers can go beyond just doing administrative work;
- ⇒ inform more young people about social rights in detail: where to go to claim these rights, how to start a procedure for this, etc. Using videos could be an easy way to pass the message.

... and access to rights can improve with

- ⇒ using the good examples of other young people living in the neighbourhood and who managed well in life;
- ⇒ entering a dialogue and long discussions with the youngsters; for example, by explaining to them that the bad image that people have of immigrants is not a destiny;
- ⇒ explaining that there are possibilities. We just have to explain to them that they can do things, that they have the same right to do things as any other youngsters;
- ⇒ the first step would be to improve access to work;
- ⇒ improving the work of building trust between youth workers and youngsters. Accompanying young people, supporting them when needed is really important! Making them self-reliant.



SOCIAL RIGHTS

... for Lysiane, social worker, the problem is that

- ⇒ young people from the neighbourhoods are sometimes forgotten by political representatives.

... the solutions should include...

- ⇒ youth workers acting as a support for young people of the neighbourhoods as soon as they become aware that they can be actors of projects;
- ⇒ communication, networking of the associative youth sphere and meetings with politicians can be important factors in order to improve the situation.

... for Sylvie, social worker in a rural area, the problems are

- ⇒ the lack of knowledge on how to claim social rights;
- ⇒ inappropriate services, where young people encounter disdain and lack of respect.

... and solutions should include

- ⇒ accompanying the young person to claim his or her rights;
- ⇒ improving the services, particularly by training the personnel to be able to properly welcome young people.

... for Teodora, a young person from the “former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia”,

- ⇒ the main reason why young people don't take advantage of their social rights is because of ignorance that they exist. The first problem appears in the definition of disadvantaged young people and what exactly they are lacking. Also, a problem could appear when young people claim their rights, but no one is listening just because they are young and have no experience.

... and the solutions?

- ⇒ What the everyday citizen can do is educate peers on social rights, the institutions that are representing them and the ways to get them. The setting of this little “lecture” is not as important as the message and the way in which it is delivered.