

“Crafting the Strategy...”

Imagine trying to set up a system to start youth work all over again. Given a budget but no youth structures to work with, how to develop the conditions needed to set up youth programmes, quality youth exchanges and initiatives? Reet describes the challenges she has been facing in implementing the Youth For Europe programme in Estonia.

Strategies are both plans for the future and patterns from the past

While strategy is a word that is usually associated with the future, its link to the past is no less central. As Kierkegaard once observed, life is lived forward but understood backward.

After the era of uniformation, Estonia was more or less left with no youth structures. Even though the enthusiasm was still there, the new business-minded state strategy did not consider youth work as being a priority area for development. Today, after eight years, we can see a slight move towards actions undertaken in order to build up a state youth policy which is nevertheless not totally sufficient to be able to implement European youth programmes that need a solid infrastructure... In other words while integrating the Youth For Europe programme into the Estonian youth work it soon became evident that given the reality, there was much that had to be done in order to accomplish the ideal. And obviously that was what we were striving for.

Assessment of the situation required a thorough look at the needs as well as the resources available at local, regional and national level which could be of use to the implementation of the YFE programme. Besides others, we discovered the lacks in human resources (lack of competence in youth work and international project management), which would have become an insuperable obstacle if ignored.

Given these reasons, we decided to organise the training of users as well as the “messengers” of the programme. The main target groups identified were: YFE regional co-ordinators, YFE trainers and resource persons and young people (project groups) with an intention to realise a YFE project.

Effective strategies develop in all kinds of strange ways

Effective strategies can show up in the strangest places and develop through the most unexpected means. There is no “one best way” to make strategy, especially if it has anything to do with human minds. Our strategy with regards to training the particular

target groups evolved more or less while we proceeded. Having said that, the concrete steps taken were nevertheless put in perspective and carefully planned.

Strategies need not be deliberate - they can also emerge...

The following elaborates on the reasons and means of our actions along the way:

First we figured that even though Estonia is a rather small country (45,227 sq. km) with reasonably few people living here (1,490,0), we would still have to expand our grip in order to reach the remotest areas. The answer was the creation of a network of Youth For Europe regional co-ordinators. Given the profile of the people in the network as well as their unfamiliarity with the programme or what it had to offer, we decided to offer a training course.

The aim of training the regional co-ordinators was to give them a deep insight into the background, content, actions etc of the programme and necessary skills and knowledge to ensure that the distribution of information about Youth For Europe as well as the guidance and advice about project management reaches both organised and unorganised youth groups at local level.

Over a period of time a network of 19 people, who were motivated to work voluntarily as programme regional co-ordinators, was put together. During 1998 a five-phased training course was organised in order to give them the necessary competence to perform their tasks as regional co-ordinators.

Regarding the necessity to be able to “talk of your own experience” and keeping in mind the specificity of the YFE programme, it was also important to ensure that the people in the network had an international experience (short study visit, international training, partner finding seminar) as a complementary element to a national training.

To be perfectly honest there were times over the period, while carrying out the training, when we – the agency – were puzzled by the direction the things

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were taking. Like, for example, the expectations we had towards this network changed (the unexplainable delay of the network to start functioning in practice), and there were changes implemented to the programme and also to the overall aims of the network. Things are not always what they seem or what you want them to be I guess, and therefore flexibility and the ability to change the course of things is important. All in all even though the process was hard, the end result is still a success, for at this point we have a network of people in Estonia, who know the programme inside out and are able and willing to put some effort into the "messengers" tasks.

As to results...well...all members of the network have officiated at some information activities. The most frequent starting point has been an information session for local and regional youth workers that has also enabled the co-ordinators to create necessary contacts in the respective field. Also articles in local newspapers, information actions for local young people and counselling of specific projects have been organised.

Having the network in gear, which now covered the part of informing and counselling of the target groups we were faced with the need for people able to carry out training in various aspects that have to do with international co-operation in the youth field.

The idea was to form and train a team of 5 trainers, who would thereafter be able to prepare, run and evaluate different types of training activities in the youth work field at national level, with special attention to international youth work. The way to go about it at that point was to plan an 8 day training course together with Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia, which increased the challenge of the whole activity. Clearly the training needed some serious work put into it, therefore also professional trainers were asked to carry out the training. The participants selected were all youth workers who had experience in international youth work. The content of the training concentrated on different aspects concerning the analysis of the role of the trainer within international youth work, the specificity of the training within an intercultural context, skills training for trainers as well as special aspects of the Youth For Europe programme.

In our everyday work we can feel the relief which has resulted from the success of this training with regards to the team of trainers and resource people, whom we use whenever we have an upcoming training or information seminar. The intentional linguistic preparedness of the trainers also enables the Estonian Youth For Europe Agency to carry out activities in Russian which, given the actual situation in Estonia today, is the main language of approximately 40% of the population.

The cornerstone of the overall training strategy is nevertheless *training of young people (youth groups) who have the intention to realise a YFE project*. The need of it became apparent after some time of existence of the YFE programme in Estonia, where we saw the need for a project development training for unorganised youth groups who had no support from a youth worker nor from an organisation.

Each training (three times a year) involves approximately 30 young people from 10 to 15 projects. The most significant thing about this training is that it's been structured so that it gives the opportunity to go through all the phases of a concrete project which the young people take along in a form of an idea (sometimes it can be more than

an idea). During the course of the training they can develop the idea into a concrete action and finally submit the project for funding. Project development also includes the important aspects that sometimes get lost on the way while the project groups get too much caught up by management details and do not pay enough attention to the content of the project. Such aspects are: cultural preparation, communication, team work, active participation of all the participants, risk management, etc.

The training has proved to be sufficient in two ways: first of all there are always projects being submitted for the next deadline and second, and in my opinion more important, they show quality in partnership and dedication (ownership) to the project by young people themselves.

Has the investment paid off?

As we say in Estonia "Parem on seal, kus meid ei ole!" (the grass is always greener on the other side) and if we acted accordingly, we would never be satisfied and even hinder the positive aspects of our work. For in the short period of the YFE programme existing in Estonia and the even shorter period when it has been possible to submit a project, we have seen a big change in the quality of international youth exchange projects as well as the youth initiative projects. The biggest of these changes is the transformation from international youth camp type of activities to thematic youth exchanges where the educational, partnership and methodological aspects have been carefully thought through and planned.

The change has been the result of the support system in the form of training we have created. We have realised that if not given the possibility to reflect on why and how the things are done with regards to a YFE project, people do not always have the time or do not consider it such an important part of the success of a project's implementation.

What about the strategy?

To unravel some of the confusion - and move away from the artificial complexity we have piled around the strategy-making process - we need to get back to some basic concepts. The most basic of all is the intimate connection between thought and action. That is the key to craft, and so also to the crafting of strategy.

While it is certainly true that many intended strategies are ill-conceived, I believe that the problem often lies one step beyond that, in the distinction we make in the first place between formulation and implementation, the common assumption that thought must be independent of (and precede) action. Sure, people could be smarter - but not only by conceiving smarter strategies. Sometimes they can be smarter to allow their strategies to develop gradually, through the organisation's actions and experiences. Smart strategies appreciate that they cannot always be smart enough to think through everything in advance.

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