



by Iris Bawidamann

Institutional perspectives – Council of Europe

And what do institutions do?

The Council of Europe

and youth participation

Young people are not only the future, look around; they are present, already now! And who would know better about their needs and potentials than young people themselves? This has been – in very simple words - the basic approach of the Council of Europe and in particular it’s Directorate of Youth and Sport towards youth participation for more than 30 years.

The Council of Europe is convinced that democracy can only be safeguarded if we start to involve and educate people from the youngest possible age. Young people are key players when it comes to democracy in our present and future societies. In this context, **youth participation is always to be seen in a framework of values** such as human rights, democracy and non-discrimination. Only when these related values and concepts are accepted and respected as well, can young people fully participate and have a real say.

► On a political level - the Committee of Ministers

In its recommendation No. R (97) 3 the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers recommends to all member states to :

- promote partnership between youth organisations and authorities at national, regional and local levels;
- encourage young people to participate in the voluntary sector;
- encourage the implementation of the Charter on Youth participation (see details on the Charter below in section “the Congress”). The importance of cooperation between youth, non-governmental youth structures and governmental structures was strengthened as well during the 7th Conference of European Ministers responsible for Youth (MJN 7 (2005) 3 rev).

► On a local and regional level – the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (usually known as the Congress) is an important key player within the Council of Europe as regards youth participation. It developed back in 1992 a first version of a charter on youth participation which was revised in co-operation with DYS – and thus with the involvement of youth and governmental representatives - in 2003. The full name of the document is **revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life** and contains sectoral policies in which young people should have a say as well as concrete instruments for structured youth participation.

In April 2008, the Congress adopted a resolution and a recommendation on the integration and participation of young people in local and regional life (CG(15)8RES and CG(15)8REC) in which it calls all its members to acknowledge the contribution that young people can make to improving local and regional democracy and gives recommendations on how to do so effectively.

In cooperation with the Steering Group on Local and Regional Democracy and with involvement of the Council of Europe’s youth sector, the Congress organised a **European local democracy week** in 2008 with the aim of fostering the knowledge of local democracy and promoting the idea of democratic participation at a local level.



► In the youth sector – the Directorate of Youth and Sport

To translate the promoted concept of youth participation into practice, the Council of Europe's Directorate of Youth and Sport (DYS) has set up a **co-management system**, in which the votes of governmental representatives and representatives of European youth NGOs have the same weight. They are taking decisions together with equal votes on important questions of the sector such as the priorities of the Directorate and the budgetary allocations to different priorities. Also the concrete programme of the DYS itself is decided upon by representatives of governmental and youth representatives together. One of the work priorities decided on for the Directorate of Youth and Sport has been for some six years "youth participation and active citizenship".

As general instruments, the DYS supports not only youth participation projects in the two **European Youth Centres Budapest and Strasbourg** with logistical, financial and educational support, but also offers financial support to projects and activities taking part outside the European Youth Centres through the **European Youth Foundation**.

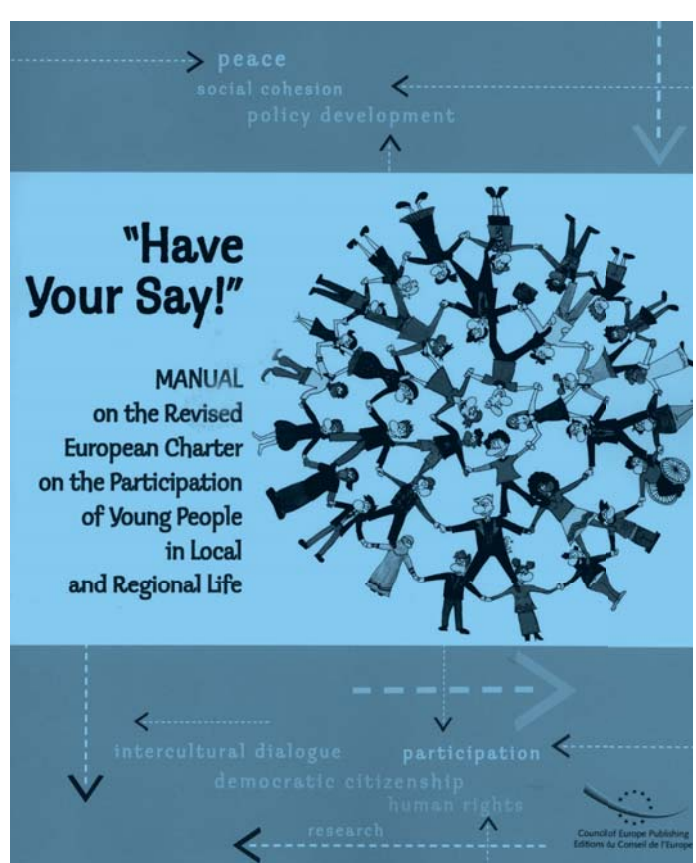
On a more grass-roots level, the DYS is organising **educational activities** for youth leaders, youth workers as well as governmental representatives responsible for youth issues mainly on local and regional levels. These activities comprise intense training courses, big symposia with up to 120 participants and study sessions (being seminars organised in cooperation with European youth NGOs).

Different **materials** to multiply the outcomes of these activities have been developed, which serve interested people as important tools in their work on fostering youth participation. Such materials include reports and documentation of the activities, a youth-friendly version of the above-mentioned Charter in different languages, a leaflet on the full Charter in different languages, an interactive CD-Rom with the youth-friendly version of the Charter on it in different languages, as well as a manual on the Charter with background information and hints and tips.

In 2008 DYS worked on an impact study of its training courses on participation as well as on a publication containing useful references and resources for people wishing to work more on youth participation issues.

In 2006 and 2007 DYS ran a **European Youth Campaign "all different – all equal"** on human rights, participation and diversity, in the framework of which many projects on local and regional level in nearly all of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe took place.

All activities and materials of the DYS aim to empower young people regardless of their social, economic and ethnic background; and multipliers to participate actively in public life and democratic processes, and to be actors of social change.



► Looking forward – challenges

Looking forward to coming years, a challenge will be to further multiply a value-based approach to youth participation in Europe and beyond. Until today, the term youth participation is widely used but unfortunately still partly misused. The aim needs to be that youth participation becomes a widely accepted concept where young people are not only a token or decoration but have a real say.

A further challenge we all face is the integration and participation of young people with fewer opportunities. In this light it is very important to recognise existing pre-conditions to youth participation and to create an inviting environment where possibilities for participation are created and open for everyone.

However, these challenges can be overcome by a close cooperation between all actors involved in youth participation issues – on an institutional, governmental and non-governmental level.

Finally it is good to highlight that in the so-called Agenda 2020, a political paper on the future directions of the Directorate of Youth and Sport, which was adopted at the Ministerial Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth in Kiev (10 and 11 October 2008), youth participation and democratic citizenship is mentioned and will therefore stay a priority of the Council of Europe's youth sector.

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