



by Jutta Koenig-Georgiades

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Institutional perspectives –European Commission Structured dialogue and Youth in Action: instruments for active citizenship

Writing an article about youth participation at European level leads back to the White Paper on Youth of 2001 which recognised that young people need to be encouraged to play their full role in civic and democratic life and identified four priority areas for action: participation, information, voluntary activities and a greater understanding and knowledge of youth.

Member States decided to have a coordinated approach and developed the so-called Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to cooperate in enhancing the four priority areas. The first step was to identify major challenges in the Member States, legislation and examples of good practice. To this end, questionnaires were sent to the Member States. Each country was also asked what it wanted to see happen at European level. On the basis of the answers, the Commission drafted common objectives for participation and information of young people. The European Youth Forum was consulted before the Commission made its proposals.

The Member States then agreed on the following common objectives to increase participation:

- increase young people's participation in the civic life of their community,
- increase young people's participation in the system of representative democracy,
- provide greater support for various forms of learning to participate.

► Structured dialogue

The structured dialogue is a means of mutual communication with young people in order to implement the above-mentioned priorities of the open method of coordination in the youth field and in general to have a substantial working relationship between authorities and young people on all levels.

The structured dialogue between EU institutions and young people has been implemented by the European Commission in co-operation with the Member States, the European Youth Forum and the National Youth Councils since the beginning of 2007.

The concept is based on the conviction that youth participation in democratic institutions and a continuous dialogue between policy makers and young people contribute to make our democracies function and youth policies sustainable.

The structured dialogue has also to be seen as a contribution of the youth field to the implementation of the Commission's Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate. Plan D stresses the need to give all citizens – particularly the young – the tools to actively participate in the European decision-making process and to reinforce their sense of ownership of the European project. The structured dialogue is an instrument that contributes to achieve this objective.

Through the structured dialogue, the EU institutions want to make full participation of young people in society a reality. EU institutions and policies have a key role to play, but at the same time young people as well have to play their part and take their responsibilities.

The structured dialogue is organised in thematic cycles. During 2007, the thematic priority was inclusion and diversity, whereas two thematic priorities were treated in 2008: the Intercultural Dialogue in the first semester and «Future challenges for young people» from April onwards. The Commission attaches particular importance to the cycle on «Fu-



ture challenges for young people» giving young people the opportunity to make proposals for the next decade of youth policy cooperation and to react and provide feedback to the Commission's proposals.

The structured dialogue is developed with and through youth organisations. It involves a large diversity of young people and a broad scope of different youth organisations.

Another important aspect is that the structured dialogue gives young people the opportunity to acquire skills and competences through non-formal and informal learning experiences in a European dimension.

The structured dialogue takes place at the national, regional and local level, as well as at the European level. EU level events of the structured dialogue are Presidency Youth Events and European Youth Weeks. The objective of the European Youth Events is to draw conclusions, in terms of formally adopted text which will be a subject of political discussion with EU institutions.

In 2008, the Youth Event of the Slovenian Presidency focused on the outcome of the cycle of debates on the «inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities» organised by the team presidency of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia. The Youth Event of the French Presidency which took place in July, focussed on intercultural dialogue.

The European Youth Week in November 2008 had as main theme «Future challenges for young people»; celebrating the successful implementation over a period of 20 years of EU youth programmes, whilst also reflecting on the future direction of EU youth policies beyond 2009. During the European Youth Week, activities happened throughout Europe, major stocktaking and evaluation exercises were organised in all Member States and a visible centralised event took place in Brussels.

► Youth in Action: an instrument for active citizenship

The Youth in Action Programme is the privileged instrument to implement and put into practice youth policy cooperation. Up to now, European youth programmes have not only had an impact on young people, on their immediate environment and on the organisations working in the field of youth, but they have also had a political impact and have clearly contributed to the awareness of citizenship among young people.

The Youth in Action Programme which entered into force in 2007, funds projects which are designed to encourage a sense of active European citizenship in young people and encourages young people to become more involved in the democratic process at regional, national and European level. It promotes active citizenship, non-formal learning and mobility of young Europeans by supporting a large variety of youth activities, such as youth exchange, youth initiatives, trans-national voluntary services and training and networking for youth workers and youth organizations.

The Youth in Action Programme is the instrument for supporting the structured dialogue in Member States and at European level. Its Action 5.1 «Meetings of young people and those responsible for youth policy» offers means of supporting the structured dialogue at the local, regional and national level.

Youth in Action gives young people the opportunity to take part in the development of society in general and of the European Union in particular, by developing the intercultural learning of young people, by supporting a sense of belonging to the European Union, and by promoting the fundamental values of the Union among young people. ■

“Getting young people more involved in the life of the local, national and European communities, and fostering active citizenship thus represent one of the major challenges, not only for the present but also for the future of our societies.”

the White Paper notes

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