



by Diogo Pinto

# Institutional perspectives – European Youth Forum Citizenship, Participation and Youth Organisations: meeting young people’s needs

**When do we become citizens? When we’re born? When we get involved in the life of our community? When we vote for the first time? It’s a little bit of all these things, and of all of them combined. Besides, there is no doubt that a person who participates in the life of their community is a citizen, whether a national or European citizen, whether young or old, or even a foreigner.**

This article aims to show that the participation of young people in the life of a society is of major importance, emphasising the relevance of youth organisations in promoting this, and highlighting the importance of youth organisations being representative.

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) is a participatory and representative platform - in the sense that it offers the possibility for all young people to participate. The YFJ sees participation as a sustainable process in which young people or a group can find the necessary means and space to express themselves and to be active members of a given process. Of course, not all such spaces have necessarily to be created and made available by youth bodies; nor do they have to be linked to a political decision-making process. However, it is crucial that these spaces exist and that they are made possible with relevant support from public authorities.

Why - because youth, in particular, are an engine, a source of energy and of innovation, and while a distinct section of society, youth is also a particular moment in one’s life - a pe-

riod when one develops and constructs oneself. To provide youth with the means to participate is to offer today’s young generation, but also those generations to come, the means to

**“ Participation is about having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support, to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society. ”**

*YFJ General Assembly*

‘drop anchor’ and to take part in both the decisions that affect them and those that will concern them in the future. Young people need to experience democracy, to learn to assume responsibility and to build a sustainable citizenship. Of primary importance to young people is the creation and provision of structures, programmes and opportunities which enable them to participate.

Youth organisations remain such significant spaces for youth participation due to the fact that being a member of a youth organisation does not only mean being a consumer, but also implies creating, implementing, and contributing to the life of an organisation.

Hence youth organisations are not only participation spaces at the disposal of young people, but they are also spaces where every young person has the means to contribute to the participatory process. A youth organisation allows a young person to be the one who learns



and experiences, and to become the one who trains or supports the development of the organisation, and of its structure and activities. Within a youth organisation, everyone should be offered the same training possibilities, opportunities and means.

Participation then, lies at the heart of the concerns of youth organisations and of the YFJ. It is a principle implemented daily by thousands of volunteers throughout Europe but also within each organisation. At the YFJ level, its strict and well-determined membership criteria aim at enabling participation by all (i.e. youth organisations) within the YFJ, granting all (i.e. young people) a place within these structures. This way the YFJ ensures coherence, the sharing of values, and involvement in the platform, it refers to transparency, internal democracy, openness and inclusiveness, and guarantees that youth organisations recognise each other.

The role of youth organisations doesn't only consist of offering young people a participative space but also in ensuring that authorities support them so that youth organisations, and above all youth participation, can enjoy sustainable and continued existence: in this way, structures in which the voices and positions of young people are heard and listened to can be guaranteed at all levels. This demands differing approaches, forms and structures, according to the decision-making level, but also to the context concerned – e.g. from one European country to another. Such approaches can then vary from a local youth council, to the implementation of a structured dialogue between the YFJ, its Member Organisations and the European Union, to the implementation of a co-management system. While this diversity is necessary, the YFJ believes it is still not sufficient, and thus is working on different aspects of youth participation such as participation in decision-making alongside the possibility to vote at an earlier stage.

There are several arguments supporting the YFJ advocacy and lobby work for the lowering of the voting age to 16 in all elections:

- a combination of factors (demographic, cultural, and social) that are changing the spectrum of European societies, and affect political participation;
- to enable young people to vote at an earlier age means granting them a voice, responsibility for society and also a certain degree of recognition;
- young people need to be given the means to become involved, together with improved civic education in order to understand the importance of participation.

Not all citizens vote, but as it is a right in most European countries, there is therefore no reason for young people to be put in a special category which is radically different from the rest. Youth organisations are more or less faced with the same difficulties as the rest of the democratic system. The latter is a system open to all citizens that have the right to vote – just like youth organisations are open to all young people; in a democratic system each and everyone is given the same rights and opportunities – just like in youth organisations. Nevertheless, not all citizens vote – just as not all young people are in youth organisations. Is this a reason to denigrate both their work and level of representation? Maybe not... If youth organisations want to be representative bodies through their structures and nature, it is essential to pay attention to the inclusion of all: this is the reason to develop programmes targeting at-risk youth, and young people facing low standards of living, or discrimination. This is also the reason to implement guidelines to ensure diversity and a better awareness of diversity in their bodies; and last but not least, this is why they should equip themselves with the tools to ensure the quality of the structures and activities they propose, to offer everybody the means to participate and develop. These are the principles for which the YFJ and its Member Organisations stand, and which they implement in their daily work. Youth organisations naturally face new difficulties as regards to the integration of all, just as in wider society, but they remain structures at the avant-garde in relation to inclusion and respect for diversity, in order to enable the participation of every young person who is willing. ■

### References :



- “Meeting young people’s needs” A European Youth Forum approach to Youth Policy (0590-06) adopted by the General Assembly, 9-11 November 2006, Lithuania

### Contact :



[diogo.pinto@youthforum.org](mailto:diogo.pinto@youthforum.org)

