



by Federica Demicheli & Marco Boaria

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Impact of Youth Participation on Euromed

Youth Participation in Euromed is a key factor of the political and social development of society and of a democratic system in the area. Young people from both the sides of the Mediterranean Sea will be the leaders, actors and decision makers in the future. The challenge is to support them to acquire the competences needed to be active citizens. Youth participation in Euromed could bring a new political perspective into the area and change some stereotyped visions.

According to Mark Franklin, *“The future lies at the hand of young people. Young people hold the key of the future because they are the ones who react to new conditions. Older people are, on the whole, too set in their ways to be responsible for social and political change, so most long term change comes about by way of generation replacement”*

► Limits to Youth Participation

Participation is a key issue. Many recommendations, papers, as well as a White Paper have highlighted the need to promote young people’s participation in the life of society and their involvement in decision-making processes at all levels.

Despite many different actions and solutions – including innovative ones – which have been identified to foster youth participation, participation is still something limited, especially when talking about its impact on European (and Euromed) Youth Policy. We would like thus to focus on the limits to youth participation, in order to be aware of them, have the possibility to analyze them, create opportunity to discuss and debate about these limits and possibly find appropriate – and, why not, innovative – methods, tools, actions to overcome them and improve youth participation at all levels.

The main obstacles to youth participation can be divided into three different macro-categories.

The first refers to cultural attitudes: The cultural environment influences how youth participation is perceived: each policy and activity promoting participation should consider the different cultural aspects and should aim to promote a “setting” where diversity is a value and where the needs and wishes of young people

are respected and kept under consideration.

The second refers to the administrative and political systems: In order to grant a long-lasting and relevant level of participation, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, administrative and political systems should be re-structured and developed according to youth needs and wishes, based on the direct interaction with the younger generations whenever they are tackling issues that may concern them.

The third – the one we wish to focus on – is related to the individual and collective approaches of young people towards participation: We may ask ourselves: why might young people not wish to participate?

Without considering youth as a homogenous world, we would like to highlight the major difficulties young people face, which limit their full involvement and participation:

- young people today may not be aware of their potential and thus, live without being conscious of the importance of playing an active role and having a say in society;
- young people may face difficulties in communication and lack fundamental instruments, means and tools to interact and employ a critical approach, at all levels;
- nowadays societies push us to act more individually than collectively, and the main victims of this vision are represented by the younger generations: young people should be “trained” to raise their awareness about the importance of cooperating with others in a responsible manner, promoting diversity and intercultural dialogue;
- young people may not wish to participate because they are not familiar with a “problem solving” approach, which may help them to better understand aims and priorities of their individual and collective walks of life without being blocked by problems they are not willing and/or able to face;



- young people are not usually fully aware of the complexity of our global society and they lack instruments to understand and face this issue in a positive manner;
- young people run the risk of being considered more “passive actors” than “active ones” by different parts of society (e.g. politicians, advertising, educational systems...) and they are constantly bombarded by enormous flows of information that they cannot critically evaluate.

These obstacles to participation may be overcome by empowering young people and improving their competencies as active citizens.

► Competencies to Participate

We cannot promote and foster youth participation and its impact, especially on European Youth Policy, without considering the necessary knowledge, competencies and skills youth need to have.

Compared to the past, if on the one hand young people are offered nowadays more opportunities to participate, on the other hand they are “obliged” to develop their skills to overcome the limits to their involvement as active subjects in their own countries and in Europe.

So...what should be in young people's portfolio of competencies to support participation in Europe today?

The key competencies which are necessary for youth to play an active role in the society - and to have a say and an impact both at the local and at the European level - could be categorized as follows:

Learning to learn

Young people should be able to organize their self-learning process; they should have the necessary skills to identify, select and employ different information sources and training methods (formal, non-formal, informal), adapting them to their own strategies.

Project skills

Young people should be able to elaborate and realize projects related to their own individual walks of life, employing the knowledge gained to define the most significant aims and priorities; they should be able to critically evaluate both limits and opportunities and to draft the most appropriate strategies.

Communication skills

On the one hand, young people should have the necessary competencies to understand different kinds of messages, having different levels of complexity and transmitted through various “languages” and different means; on the other hand, they should be able to deliver their knowledge and their feelings, through different “languages”; employing various means.

Cooperation and participation skills

These “skills” include several different aspects: young people need to know how to interact in a social group, being able to valorise their own and others' competencies; they should also have the necessary skills to manage and mediate in conflict situations; finally, they should be aware of the importance of their contribution to collective action, as well as the importance of respect for the fundamental rights which are the basis of society.

Autonomy and responsibility

Young people should have the skills to actively participate in the life of the society, with full awareness about their own and others' needs and rights, about opportunities, restrictions, rules and responsibilities.

Problem-solving competencies

Young people should be equipped to face problems; having the necessary skills to create and verify hypotheses, identify appropriate sources and resources, collect and evaluate data, propose proper and suitable solutions.

Identify connections and relations

In complex societies it is more and more important to be able to identify relations and connections at the basis of our social context; young people should be able to identify and represent these connections, being aware of their systemic nature.

Collecting information ability and interpreting skills

Young people should have the necessary skills to collect and interpret information, employing a critical approach, being able to evaluate its reliability and usefulness and distinguishing facts and opinions. If we want to promote youth participation and promote its impact on European Youth Policy, it is of the utmost importance to know who the actors are who will provide young people with the “competencies to participate”.

One of the most relevant answers to this question is found in the “European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life” adopted by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe on 21 May 2003.

The Charter mainly gives to local and regional authorities – the public entities which are closer to young people – the responsibility to train and support young people to promote their active involvement in society. They are required to play a primary role in the field of youth participation, human and civil rights education and non-formal education, by providing services and tools, as well as organizational support. In particular, local and regional authorities (see Title II, Art. II.1 of the Charter), should promote training opportunities addressed to youth workers, including teachers; develop “civic educational” programmes; favour the exchange of good practice among the different actors involved; and should finally promote the full participation and involvement of the younger generation in the life of the community and in the decision-making process at all stages.

Civil society should also play a relevant role; cooperating with other relevant stakeholders in the community to promote and foster youth participation.

This reflection about competencies started at the European Level, but it represents an important starting point also in the Euromed context. Youth participation and the role of young people in some Meda countries are becoming priorities. Young people need “space”, support and training in order to develop these competencies to become active citizens in their own countries.

Organizations, institutions and schools are looking for models and methods to train young people and to increase their life skills in active participation and democracy.

▶ Youth Participation in Euromed: Something Special?

In the Euromed area, youth participation is seen as necessary for reforms and is considered an on-going process that is increasingly being discussed in civil society and government spheres.

There are at least three reasons that make the youth participation process in the Euromed area of great importance. Firstly, in the Arab countries young people constitute the majority. Secondly, young people present the tomorrow’s elite that will be able to bring new political visions and strategies. Thirdly, young people are the base for promoting any kind of political development aiming to a democratic reform.

According to Marina Ottaway (2005), the Southern Mediterranean is an area where “presidents and kings remain powerful, untrammelled by limits imposed by effective parliaments and independent judiciaries. Countervailing institutions remain weak, if they exist at all, not only because constitutions and laws deliberately keep them that way, but also because they are not backed by organized citizens demanding political rights, participation, and government accountability”.

In a recent study about Youth in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon (Jamil 2007), 83.3 percent of young people interviewees, regardless of whether they had experienced participation, confirmed that they were strong believers in their potential as actors in any process of reform, and showed a great degree of conviction that their participation could make a major difference. Beside their determination to promote change, 71.4 percent seemed sceptical about their ability to translate this will into a political reality. This is an important point: they are not aware of the different channels of participation and of the importance of reinforcing their ability to push for change. Participation in some countries is not supported in real life: it may be in the election in the University, but not into political reality.

Youth Participation is not easy in some Meda countries but young people have an important role within civil society organisations and within associations and NGOs.

NGOs and associations provide young people spaces for socialisation and culture rather than one for promoting change. These organisations are the social environment in which young people can start their experimentation of active participation through

local initiatives, projects, etc. Another space for supporting active participation of young people is the international framework of some European programmes like Euromed or Youth in Action (in the context of the Barcelona Process).

▶ Euromed Space of Confrontation and Participation

The cooperation projects are a significant venue for confronting the different experiences, realities and perceptions about Youth Participation and Active Citizenship between young people.

These possibilities allow young people to develop a new perspective about the others and to better understand the realities in the countries abroad.

The impact of Youth Participation on Euromed is visible in the development of new international projects with a strong influence at the local and national level. Young people can develop new tools and competencies in order to be more aware of their role in society, but also to be prepared to take active part in it. This larger perspective supports them to better understand the complex political and social situation in the Mediterranean area. Young people have the possibility, in this experience, to go beyond the political stereotypes and the media information about other countries and to experience active exchange and debate on such topics.

In Euromed, young people have the possibility to be actors in this specific political arena and to implement their competencies on participation.

The interconnection between Euro and Meda countries is very important in this historical moment. Young people have to be able, in the future, to bring a new political stream to the international level.

Active Participation is not merely based on the ability to express personal ideas, thoughts and opinions in a certain context, but also to take part and share a common activity in public life. Euromed, as well as the experience inside NGOs, can be the place to experiment with pilot processes of citizenship and to try to understand limits and opportunities. ■

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Contact : ✕

demichelifederica@gmail.com
marco.boaria@aldaintranet.org @