



by Finn Denstad

Youth participation in youth policy development the case of Southeast Europe

The Council of Europe and the institutions of the European Union have developed a European standard with their strong positions advocating for youth participation in youth policy development and implementation. But why is youth participation so important and how can non-governmental youth organisations play an important role in youth policy development? Some reflections from a youth policy advocate with a special interest in the Western Balkans.

I have, for the last decade or so, had the privilege of following the youth policy sector in Southeast Europe from different arenas or viewpoints. (The terms «Southeast Europe» and «the Western Balkans» refer to the following entities: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). And let it be said: The situation today – in terms of articulated government policy regarding young people – has certainly improved over the last ten years. With the adoption of the National Youth Strategy by the Serbian government in spring 2008, most countries of the Western Balkans now have articulated national youth policies. Ten years ago, this was completely absent. The only country in the region that does not have a national youth strategy is Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, the entity of Republika Srpska has such a strategy.

But this has so far had a limited effect on the ground. Young people still suffer from an outdated education system, massive youth unemployment (with 40-50 percent and more in some countries), few leisure-time opportunities and a poor family economy with almost non-existent opportunities to travel. The strict visa regimes of the European Union and other western countries only add to a feeling of isolation and neglect among young people in Southeast Europe.

► Participation as a youth policy tool

There is of course no quick formula that will dramatically improve the situation of young people in a few years. Only a long-term strategic effort by responsible politicians and policy-makers will make a difference. Allocating sufficient funding and

applying good youth policy tools are necessary. One such policy tool is to involve young people themselves in youth policy development. This does not have a long tradition in the Balkans however and is often met with either shaking heads or virtual question marks. Why youth participation and how do we do it?

► What is youth participation?

I will come back to the situation in the Balkans, but let me first of all clarify what I mean by youth participation in a youth policy context. The concept consists of two important elements. As the term suggests, it is all about involving young people directly in developing a strategy for how a government should address issues that affect young people themselves. It can be at any government level; local, regional or national. (The term also applies to inter-governmental organisations such as the European institutions and the United Nations, but I will concentrate my reflections in this article to address youth participation at the national level). In particular, it is about letting young people play a central role in identifying what are the main challenges and issues for young people that the government should address, as well as involving them in identifying tools for addressing the youth policy needs. In other words, youth participation is about involving young people in articulating goals, objectives, measures and indicators of youth policy and identifying the way forward. This can be done through surveys targeting youth, the use of focus groups, open meetings between government officials and young people and by involving informal youth groups and non-governmental youth associations. Ideally, young people should be targeted through a combination of all of the above.

But just as important as involving youth in developing youth policy, young people should participate in the implementation of such policy. This means that there must be permanent and institutionalised consultation mechanisms in place that allow young people to be in regular contact with authorities responsible for implementing the government’s strategy for youth. Such consultation mechanisms can be annual youth conferences on youth policy, organised by the government; the establishment of and regular contact with a youth commission consisting of young people or regular contact between the government and the umbrella of non-governmental youth associations, typically called a (local, regional or national) youth council.

▶ **The role of non-governmental youth organisations**

In most parts of Europe, non-governmental youth organisations (NGYOs) typically play an important role as government partners in youth policy development. Every so often I hear the argument that this is unfair, since this gives youth that are organised a more privileged position over those that are not involved in associative life. Therefore, the argument goes, youth organisations do not represent all young people and should therefore only be given a limited role as youth policy partners.

Long essays can be written (and indeed have been!!) in support of the claim that youth associations do have a legitimate role to play as government partners in youth policy development. All arguments cannot be elaborated on here but a central argument for involving NGYOs, however, is that they are democratic structures which allow them to form democratic positions that represent the opinions of their members. So although it is recognised that they certainly do not represent all young people, they represent groups of young people instead of individuals, making it possible to reach out to and get the opinions of larger groups of young people. For this reason, national youth councils in particular, which are umbrella organisations of NGYOs, are seen as important partners in youth policy development.

The argument just presented assumes, of course, that non-governmental youth organisations are in fact democratic structures. The idea is that all positions of an NGO represent the membership of the organisation. This assumption can be challenged, however, in particular in the countries in Southeast Europe (see below). But let me be clear on this point: To the extent that a youth organisation should have any claim to be involved

in youth policy development, it is essential that it has internal democratic structures, democratically elected leadership and that its positions reflect the opinions of its members.

Those who argue that “organised youth” should not be given a more privileged position as government partners than “non-organised youth” imply that these youth groups are radically different from one another and that young people in NGYOs are somewhat of an “elite” or extra resourceful persons. I believe this is a wrong assumption. My experience is that young people will use the opportunities that exist. Those who involve themselves in a local youth club, join a choir or the scouts or a youth association promoting the environment, are as diverse and different as “unorganised” youth. What they have in common is an interest and dedication in one specific area.

▶ **Why youth participation?**

Now that I have clarified what youth participation in youth policy means, and argued that non-governmental youth associations should be included as important actors in both youth policy development and implementation, the fundamental question still remains: Why is youth participation important? Shouldn’t the tasks of developing and implementing policy be left to politicians and professionals? Should specific groups of citizens have the right to influence government policy? And furthermore, many young people do not have a developed understanding of politics, so why should they have a right to be listened to by government decision-makers? (Now, you may think that these are antiquated and silly questions, but I have indeed come

across them a number of times in my work as a youth policy advocate in the Balkans and elsewhere.)

Young people make up one of the largest demographic populations in any European country; this is also the case in the Balkans. (In Southeast Europe, Kosovo has the youngest population with 60% of the population being between 15 and 29 years old. Serbia, on the other hand, with one of the oldest populations in the Balkans, has 20% of its population in the same age category. Figures are from UNFPA and the Serbian National Youth Strategy.) The idea of involving young people in policy-development and decision-making on issues that have an impact on them is as such seen as a fundamental democratic right. It comes from a vision of young people as full citizens in society, and the right of citizens to have a say and to be involved in issues that have an impact on them. Democracy is not only about transparent

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and fair elections and majority rule. It is about everything that happens in between.

A central pillar of contemporary democracy is the concept of a strong civil society which will keep government and politicians accountable. An informed and engaged citizenry is the fundament of a civil society, and this is where the non-governmental associations can play a crucial role. By interacting with other people through associations and volunteer work we develop a sense of responsibility and sensitivity for our society and awareness for our fellow citizens. Non-governmental organisations promote citizenship. Democratic youth associations have the added function of serving as “schools of democracy”, where young people participate in elections for the first time, learn about the concepts of representation and accountability and to stand up for their own opinions. The development of democratic NGYOs should therefore be especially encouraged by any government.

► **The European institutions**

The view of participative democracy described above is also shared by the Council of Europe, the institutions of the European Union and the United Nations system. They all have clear policies advocating the participation of young people in developing national youth strategies and stress the role of non-governmental youth organisations in youth policy decision-making. The enlargement of the European Union to include most of the countries in the former “communist bloc” has resulted in a comprehensive development of non-governmental associations and civil society in these countries. Functioning national youth councils now exist in most EU member states. Mechanisms of involving young people have been developed, and NGYOs play an important role as government partners in youth policy-making.

► **Youth organisations in Southeast Europe**

So, what is the situation in Southeast Europe? Is youth participation in youth policy a recognised concept, and are non-governmental youth organisations involved in youth policy development? Unfortunately, non-governmental youth associations in Southeast Europe are typically weak. They are most often not membership-based, but run by individuals or small groups of people that mobilise their peers whenever

they receive funding to do a project or otherwise organise an activity. They are project-oriented and compete for the same limited project funds. This leads to a high level of competition, rivalry, suspicion and a lack of cooperation and partnership. Decisions taken by the leadership are rarely challenged, and the organisations often have a weak democratic culture and are often outright undemocratic. As a result, there are very few national youth organisations, and representative national youth councils do not exist in any of the countries. The situation has not changed much in the last ten years.

The absence of a strong and coordinated NGYO lobby to push for the development of youth policy meant that there was little domestic pressure for the government to develop youth policy. It was instead the European Commission and the Council

of Europe which, through their relations with the Balkan countries, made them understand the need to develop national youth strategies. The Stability Pact Working Group on Young People, effective from year 2000 until 2002, also played an important role in promoting national youth policy action plans in the region.

► **Successful lobbying in Serbia**

The exception in this regard is Serbia. For several years, the Serbian government gave little

attention to youth policy issues at all, and by mid-2005 there was no government authority responsible for youth. While the other countries in the region developed national youth strategies, Serbia remained at status quo. This finally caused the largest NGYOs in the country to take action. Together they established the Youth Coalition, which conducted a long and effective lobby campaign towards the government. They had two demands: A government authority responsible for youth and a national youth strategy. Today, even government officials admit that the establishment of the Ministry of Youth and Sport in May 2007 is at least partially as a result of this campaign. And the new ministry made the development of a national youth strategy its first and overriding task. So youth organisations in the Balkans can certainly be influential if they act in a strong and coordinated manner!

► **Vision of youth policy**

A government’s own vision of what youth policy is and why it is important is an essential determinant of the level of youth

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participation it will choose in developing youth policy. If youth policy is perceived as the answer to how to keep youngsters away from crime and drugs and HIV/Aids and otherwise have a problem-oriented perspective of young people, there is typically no role for youth participation at all, since youth policy is seen as a policy for young people.

If, on the other hand, youth policy is perceived as a strategy for empowering young people and for letting them realise their full potential as full citizens in society, there is plenty of room for youth participation. Involving young people in youth policy will then be seen as natural, since young people are seen as a resource. With such a positive vision, youth policy is seen as a policy both for and with young people.

The latter perspective has been dominant in Western European countries for some time and is gaining progress also in the new EU member states. It is also the vision promoted by the European Union and the Council of Europe. In Southeast Europe, however, it is the more problem-oriented perspective of young people that prevails. True, all national youth strategies and action plans in the region have been developed with the participation of non-governmental youth organisations – in some countries setting an exceptional standard for how citizens can be involved in policy development processes. Nevertheless, the mentality at the local and regional levels, as well as in most government structures at the national level, remains stuck in the “old thinking” that young people are a problem that needs to be treated. Adding to this is the situation that non-governmental youth associations are often met with suspicion and criticism. This does not create the most favourable environment for youth participation, and at the local and regional level this remains an obstacle to youth participation in youth policy development in all the countries of the region.

▶ **Good examples**

Despite the present challenges, it is important to note the positive developments in Southeast Europe in the latest years. In all countries, developing youth strategies was done with the active involvement of young people.

The latest country to develop such a strategy, Serbia (2007-2008), organised consultations with young people across the land on a scale previously unseen as part of any policy development in recent memory. It also took a positive approach to involve non-governmental youth organisations at the local and national levels, allocating more funding to strengthen the non-governmental sector than any previous government in the region. Finally, the Serbian government started a process of establishing local youth offices with trained staff across the country aimed at promoting the development of local youth policy plans. Involving young people and youth organisations are central elements of the Serbian strategy. For once, Serbia has set a positive example that should be examined and followed by the other countries in the Western Balkans. ■



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