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Institutional perspectives – SALTO “Youth Programmes”: European tools for Youth Participation

Participation of young people is one of the main priorities of the Youth in Action Programme alongside European citizenship, cultural diversity and the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities. It aims to encourage young people to take an active role in society, to increase their participation in the system of representative democracy as well as to support any initiative that encourages and teaches active participation.

The purpose of this article is to describe the steps that have been taken in this field within the framework of the European Commission Youth Programmes, to give some example of projects and practices and to provide details about useful resources.

Background

One of the main concerns over the last two decades has been the improvement of the active participation of young people in the life of their community. There have been many policy developments in this field at European level.

However for many years, the European Commission Youth Programmes were almost the only tools for cooperation aimed at encouraging the mobility of young people and promoting their active participation.

The Programme known as “Youth” (2000-2006) supported a large variety of projects such as youth exchanges, European Voluntary Service and youth initiative projects directly aimed at young people or training courses and networking activities for youth workers and NGOs.

During the implementation phase of this programme, another important step was taken in youth participation policy development. With the publication in 2001 of the White Paper on youth entitled “A new impetus for youth” a new framework for cooperation between European Union member states in the youth field was set up in order to involve more young people

in decisions that concern them. It is also important to mention that the White Paper process was very “participative” as it represented the results of a wide-range of consultations with young people at national and European level.

As a result, this publication put youth participation in the top four priorities in the European Youth field alongside information, voluntary activities and greater knowledge of youth. It also became obvious that besides its educational aspect, the Youth Programme also had a role to play in supporting the achievements of the White Paper objectives.

► **Some achievements... Youth Initiatives**

As far as youth participation as a priority is concerned, the most significant contributions of the Youth Programme have been observed within the framework of Youth Initiatives.

Indeed, through “Action 3” of the Youth Programme, groups of young people from 15 to 25 had the opportunity to get support for projects they implemented themselves at local level and which were aimed at benefiting the local community.

By being actively involved in planning and carrying out projects, young people had the opportunity to express their creativity as well as to show their willingness to positively interact with their local neighbourhood.



- The Jamklub is a youth club for young people with fewer opportunities in the harbour area of Ghent, an excellent example of a “traditional” remote area. The youngsters wanted to make a video about their daily life, tackling ‘daily’ subjects they are dealing with: free time activities, school, parents, family, love, racism, drug abuse... The main aim of this youth initiative project was to use video as a tool to communicate with the local community and to open up a discussion on the existing prejudices from the local community towards the participating youngsters.
- A group of 4 young people implemented a youth initiative aimed at designing environmental education tools addressed to other young people from 6 to 12 years. The main aim of the young promoters was to raise awareness in the local community for the protection of the brown bear of the Pyrenees Region in France.
- In Lithuania, a group of 15 teenagers were supported in a Youth Initiative project which consisted of an original Youth Bus which provided useful information for young people, such as cultural activities organised in their hometown and about the local and international organisations. There was free access to the bus as daily public transport.

Accessibility is a key factor: Any group of young people (a minimum of four) wherever they are and whether involved in an organisation or not can apply for a grant for their project. Although there are no statistics available at European level yet, it can be underlined that in many programme countries, Youth Initiatives were and still are the Action most used by young people with fewer opportunities. Because of its local setting, it is often seen in the youth field as a first step before jumping into international youth activities.

Another important aspect to be mentioned is that through Youth Initiatives, a lot of new organisations have been created and are still working. This is the case of an organisation based in Romania called “Alter Eco” which was created after the completion of a Youth Initiative Project called “Brainstorming” and which aimed at creating a European magazine where young people from Romania and Spain expressed and analysed the realities of their countries within the European context. This bi-national project was made possible because Action 3 allowed the development of projects at local level with a networking dimension, thus enabling the exchange of practices and raising awareness of other realities in other countries.

► Support for Youth (participation) Initiatives

Significant support was provided which positively affected the quantity and the quality of Youth (participation) initiative projects implemented in the Youth Programme countries. Indeed, as a fairly new action introduced into the Youth Programme, it took a lot of work at national and European levels to advertise

this action and to empower young people to realise such initiatives.

In this context SALTO-Youth Initiatives Resource Centre (currently known as SALTO-Youth Participation) was set up in 2003 with the aim of promoting Youth Initiatives at national and European levels. The main focus was to provide support and resources for National Agencies, young people, youth workers, social workers, educators and any other actors involved in local or European youth initiatives. The centre worked closely with National Agencies to promote youth initiatives as a tool for **youth participation** in society, to develop the **European dimension** of local projects, to facilitate the search for partners for networking projects, to support young people on **project management**, to develop a **coaching process** for youth initiatives, and most importantly, to strengthen the **quality of Action 3 projects**.

In addition, priority was given to the **ongoing evaluation and development of Action 3** in the frame of the YOUTH programme and the preparation of the new Programme in 2007.

Here are some examples of practice developed and which seem in my humble opinion the most significant:

1. COACHING: a coaching process was developed to support young people involved in Youth Initiative projects:

- **Coaching Youth Initiatives: a Guide for Supporting Youth Participation** was published in spring 2006. It presents concrete examples of youth participation projects, tools and guidelines to support youth workers and youth leaders who are willing to coach Youth Initiative projects. The Coaching Guide is available for download on www.salto-youth.net/participation and hard copies can be ordered online.
- **The Coach2Coach course** is aimed at contributing to the development of high quality Youth Initiative projects by the means of coaching. The target group is youth workers and those who directly work with youth initiatives as a coach/support person during the creation and development of the projects

2. GET IN NET is a training course for young people organised at European level. The overall aim of this course is to increase the quality of networking projects (currently called trans-national youth initiatives) and to explore their added value (European dimension) for the local community. The target group was young people from 18 to 25 involved in local projects related to the topic raised by each course and who wished to develop Networking activities.

The Resource Centre also organised the **international seminar “Feedback on Youth Initiatives”** in cooperation with the European Commission and National Agencies from a number of programme countries. Beneficiaries, coaches and National Agencies gathered in Brussels to share and reflect on their



Youth participation in the Actions

As an instrument for the implementation of the European Youth Policy, the Youth in Action Programme put a strong focus on the participation of young people in democratic life in order to encourage them to be active citizens. This is based on the Council resolution on the common objectives for participation by and information for young people :

- To increase the participation of young people in the civic life of their community;
- To increase participation of young people in the system of representative democracy; and,
- To allow a greater support for various forms of learning to participate.

Next to Youth Initiatives, Youth in Action introduced two new activities which, in essence, can be seen as “participative”: Youth Democracy Projects (**Action 1.3**) and the Meetings of young people and those responsible for youth policy (**Action 5.1**).

Youth Democracy offers financial and technical support for groups of young people eager to play an active role in society. Because this is a new Youth in Action activity (Action 1.3), there is a free place for innovation. Nevertheless, it's clear that a Youth Democracy project has to be based on a real partnership both at local and at trans-national level. More technically a project should involve at least 2 countries with 2 local partners per country.

Here are some examples of projects supported by National Agencies in late 2007 :

• “Youth Participation – learning and doing!” - (Akzente Salzburg)

Young people from Portugal, Germany and Austria got the chance to learn about a project called “Participation in my hometown/in my city”. The aim was to enable young people to learn about structures, methods, processes and backgrounds to finally be able to participate in an appropriate way.

The public authorities involved are supporting this process as well as they can gain knowledge about young peoples' wishes and concerns. Within 18 months it is supposed to have three international meetings of young people and their multipliers (in each country) – to plan activities, to reflect, to evaluate. On local level 10 measures (youth-events, open-spaces, conferences...) are planned in each participating country. The aim is to experience methods of the partner countries and reflect about their applicability and suitability. Communication will work via E-mail and a common Website to ensure regular exchanges between the groups.

In the long run the project wants to tackle the issue related to the involvement of young people into the decision-making processes as well as their commitment in participative structures.

• Voice It Europe

Using the power of podcasts to empower young people to take an active part in their local, national and European democracy.

respective experiences. The participants' input was the essential part of the seminar, since the evaluation of the Youth Initiative projects was solely based on their experiences. The output from the Feedback seminar consisted of conclusions on the benefits and impacts of the supported projects, recognition of their educational value and recommendations for the future programme resulting from the common discussion of the different participants.

The Resource Centre also contributed to the International **Conference for youth participation “Please Do Disturb!”** organised by the National Agency in Germany in 2005. The aims were to exchange, compare and discuss national concepts and youth participation projects, to find common strategies and answers to some of the open questions in youth participation. As a result of all the debates, participants agreed on the Hanover Declaration for Youth Participation which sets down concrete political requests on this issue.

▶ Youth in Action Programme

Further steps for youth participation

The fourth generation of the European Commission's youth programme was adopted in November 2006 following a lot of consultation with different stakeholders from the youth field.

The name given “Youth in Action” is quite significant. Indeed, there is no doubt that it is meant to be an instrument for encouraging young people to play a more active role in their community and in Europe in general.

It also aims to support European youth policy developments and in particular, the Youth Pact and the “Structured Dialogue” which aims “to stimulate a wider debate between the European Union's democratic institutions and (youth) citizens”.

Youth in Action is based on permanent priorities such as cultural diversity, inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities, European citizenship and participation.

Youth in Action is divided into five Actions which can support a large variety of projects implemented by individual or groups of young people such as youth exchanges, voluntary service projects, youth initiatives and youth democracy projects. Adults are not excluded as youth workers, trainers, representatives of NGOs or public bodies can also benefit from the programme either as support persons or as participants in Youth in Action activities such as seminars or training courses.



16 people aged between 13-19 (half from the United Kingdom and half from Latvia) collaborated using shared web space to plan, produce and publish programmes based on interviews with their peers and elected representatives.

They will be trained in journalistic skills and given the confidence to arrange and conduct interviews with influential people that might usually appear «out of reach».

They will upload the edited pieces to their own space on the global Radio waves website, making them available as podcasts to a worldwide audience of people who need and want to know how young people think.

The two groups will collaborate online to decide what Europe-wide issue or issues they want to report on - issues that affect them all, despite their geographical distance. Together, they will identify who they want to talk to. They will be supported in trying to go 'right to the top' in the European political process.

Action 5.1 “**Meetings of young people and those responsible for youth policy**” is aimed at initiating a dialogue between young people, the youth field in general and the policy makers. It is par excellence the instrument provided by the Youth in Action Programme to implement the so-called «Structure Dialogue in the Youth field».

These meetings can be organised at national level or at European level and can be aimed at either opening a space for political debate or consultation or for building bridges between different stakeholders, such as a dialogue between the formal and non-formal education fields.

► **Support available from SALTO Participation**

So...there are new opportunities offered by the programme to support youth participation. In 2007 the European Commission asked our Resource Centre to widen its scope of action to tackle this new priority and to help promote political and social youth participation.

In response, SALTO-YOUTH Participation is working to gather and disseminate resources and information related to this priority through its website and publications. The aim is to create a space for reflection and for exchanging practices and ideas that should enable young people and youth workers to develop quality participative projects.

Concretely the Resource centre organises **seminars** on Youth Participation and **training** courses on Management of trans-national Youth Initiatives (GET IN NET); Youth Democracy projects (Get Involved and Let's meet for participation training concepts) and on coaching young people. We also support partner finding for the sub actions 1.2 or 1.3 and we provide **publications** (reports, magazines, newsletters) and offer to disseminate information and interesting practices related to youth participation in general and Action 1.2 and 1.3 projects in particular.

► **Conclusion**

We can conclude that during these two last decades, the youth programmes evolved amazingly. From educational programmes, they became rather fairly unique tools for European cooperation in the non-formal education field and for implementing the priorities and objectives of the European Union's Youth Policy. Youth Participation within this framework became real for many young people in Europe and not only a good political idea. Youth in Action is offering new opportunities in this field. So, if I have a last encouragement it is to say “let's Get Involved in Youth in Action”. ■

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