



by Romina Matei

Stand by me!

There is a big world outside and to walk alone it might not be so funny ... that's why networking exists.

One of the first questions raised in the process of "participation" is: participating in what? So, in the article below I will try to share with you the experience of participating in the international youth network, Youth Express Network, an international non-governmental organisation, a non-formal structure with 15 years of experience in the field of promoting and supporting youth participation.

Once upon a time ... to be more precise back in 1991, when the word "participation" wasn't so famous, a group of youth and social workers came together in a seminar organised by the Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France. After this seminar some of the participants remained in contact and one year later, in October 1992 the network called "Cable5" had its first seminar in Strasbourg. In 1993, based on the local law, the association "Youth Express Network" was registered in Strasbourg. In the beginning it started with 17 member organisations from 7 European Union countries and now the network has 29 members from 17 countries, EU members and Armenia, Belarus, Croatia, Iceland, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Republic of Moldova and Turkey.

2008 was a special one, because Youth Express Network celebrated its 15th anniversary... HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO Youth Express Network!



Why networking in the context of youth participation? ... Because nothing is for free and nothing is definitive for you, what you have received can be taken away from you. Participation is a right and it comes with certain liabilities and it can have many faces. A network can provide many options, but the responsibility to choose the proper way to participate is in the hand of the person who wants to take part in the process. Youth Express Network offers the space to participate for everyone; it can be through arts, it can be through sports, through drawing and so on. There is a way where everyone can enter, because it exists as a youth organisation involving youth workers and young people together. The network just opens the doors and makes the meetings possible; what comes out of the meeting, well, it is a never-ending surprise! Youth Express Network means flexibility, richness of experiences and a communication tool for exchanging various information and best practices. This mobility is in harmony with the concept of active youth participation and the feelings of youngsters.

To be part of a network means partly that you receive as much as you give, sometimes even more. It is an opportunity concretely to get involved, to participate. The unique aspect in Youth Express Network is that you have the support and willingness to step out and actually go where nobody else is going and doing things which nobody else is doing, simply because there are elements of working with young people to which nobody is paying any attention. An example is the seminar made in 2000 in the European Youth Centre on the topic "Life and Death". According to Nicholas Paddison, the initiator of the seminar, "This seminar was intended to open our eyes to the responsibility we as youth workers have to the young people we work with – in the context of one of their friends dying. The seminar explored the subjects of death and bereavement. As a group we explored what our role is, what things we could do, ceremonies and symbolic acts that allow young people to express their feelings. We studied grief, secondary grief, the different impacts that different deaths have; an accident, murder, illness, suicide. We looked at different cultural and religious practices that allow or restrict young people from taking part and expressing their feelings. We looked at the different reactions young people / adults have when faced with the death of someone close. We used discussions, role plays, small group exercises, life experience and raw emotions of ourselves throughout this seminar."

► **The ingredients of a network: a lot of spices – for the colour ;) “From exclusion to integration”**

Youth Express Network brings to the European level the situation of the organisations, active at the local level, which deal with young people with fewer opportunities. Therefore Youth Express Network promotes participation, from local to international and from international to local, as a tool to fight against social exclusion. The diversity of Youth Express Network’s member organisations offers a clear image of this with members from all over Central, East, North, South, West Europe, Caucasus, Balkans, Euro Med region and so on.

Together, all the members basically exchange, network, keep in touch; they keep the spirit going. They are a network which brings people with their heart and creates the feeling of belonging. The persons who participate in different activities of the network are coming together looking at different ways of working in the field of participation and inclusion. Through exchanging experience from the local participation and adding the value of the international participation, each participant has the chance to learn new methods, tools and after it to implement it, in their local environment. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t, but it is an on-going process of encouragement and support for what they already are doing. Youth Express Network is contributing to the concept of “participation” by being itself an example of what the phrase “from exclusion to integration” means.

Nowadays it is kind of fashionable to use words like “participation” or “intercultural dialogue” and because of that, sometimes these words lose their simple and beautiful meaning. For me participation or intercultural dialogue should become a natural process for everyone. You just need the proper space and the cooperation of the people to do it. During all the years, thousands of young people had the chance to grow, to develop themselves and to experience by their own the diversity of the world. The abilities and knowledge gained during and after participation are very hard to put down simply in a few lines in an article. Sometimes the learning is about self-management, improving organisational skills, ability to change ways of thinking, being aware of the personal role in society, being an example for the other young people, taking responsibilities, having the ability to transfer the knowledge and sharing with the others, giving and so on.

► **What to be: the road to hell or stairway to heaven? What’s the “price” that you have to pay for participation within a network?**

The path of a network is not an easy one. Of course it is full of challenges and both positive and negative emotions. But Youth Express Network might be a good practice example because it



keeps permanent and strong links with the grass-root organisations; it has clear policies and answers to the problems of the young people; it provides equal access to information, possibilities and trainings; it keeps itself human, easily accessible and able to turn each failure into success.

It is true that, to participate in the frame of an international network might be very time consuming. It costs a lot, mainly in terms of motivation and commitment of yourself. Especially going international within a network can become more challenging. Networks are flexible organisms, which need to be kept alive every second and to be inspired. A recent statistic made by the office of Youth Express Network showed that the commitment and voluntary work for the network would have cost more than 100.000 Euros per year and still there are people willing to give their commitment for participating on a voluntary basis.

I can tell that when you have a dream, sometimes you think that it is only a dream and that it would not work in reality, but through participation inside a network, you meet people and you realise that it can happen, because you are not alone. Maybe there is someone who already implemented your ideas and it worked, or there is someone who just gives you the needed support and it is enough for your dream to become reality. I managed to see my dream becoming reality thanks to the people whom I met in Youth Express Network.

The added value of a network in a local and European environment is that it brings new dimension to our work. It brings the international reality and provides the possibility to participate at the European level, where you can share your reality with other countries and learn from the diversity. When you work in your own environment, you might think that there is only one way to approach this specific target group but when you look in the reality of other countries, you might see very different





points of view and this diversity can be a strong motivation to become more active in the local activities. For example, Youth Express Network organised in March 2007 in Ostia, Italy, an international seminar “Act to create for Social Inclusion and Intercultural Dialogue” where the method of Forum Theatre was used. A participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina, very active in her local organisation learned the new method and started to implement it back home with the group of children with whom she already worked. This new approach to the group, forum theatre, improved the results in her work. In May 2008, Youth Express Network organised “Balkan Tour Sunshine Bus” - a mobile seminar in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. After this project most of the participants, said that this experience changed their life. The international cooperation with which they had to deal, the fact that they had to share the same space for almost two weeks brought them a new perspective about intercultural dialogue. Visiting the local organisations from the different countries, gave them the opportunity to see concrete examples of what participation really means in the local environment. After such a successful experience, Youth Express Network is thinking of organising another mobile seminar in the Caucasus region As a result of an evaluation of this and other projects, a “cook book” for organising good intercultural projects was created and it will be available for everyone who would like to use it.

► **To participate is also about having fun ... This part also multiplies within a network**

Being in a network everything multiplies ... starting with ideas, commitment, receiving and also the fun part is increasing. What do you think? Would you have had the “courage” to make fire on the terrace, in the European Youth Centre of the Council of

Europe in Strasbourg, alone? Hmmm maybe not ... but together with 20 other people wishing to have a barbecue party, it might happen.... Or to organise a mobile seminar in a Trans Siberian train? Or maybe to sustain your participation, by making a bridge of ropes between the third floor and the fourth floor of the European Youth Centre, (it was still safe and organised by trained rope course experts!)... Again, maybe not ... these things can happen only in a network of crazy people who are doing serious things.

► **Instead of a conclusion... let's walk together!**

The lesson learned by the network is that people feel motivated to participate when they really get to know each other and friendships are being created. “Youth Express Network broadens the horizon of young people and youth and social workers; it's empowered them with knowledge, ideas and contacts; stands for equal opportunities for all – more than enough good reasons to participate from local to international.” Boyka Zagorova, ex-president and Board Member

After 15 years of experience in youth participation, for us this is only the beginning. There are so many things, so many ideas still out there that we haven't touched yet. There are so many needs that we haven't talked about. Even if there are many common problems, many solutions already proposed, there is still a lot to be done. Many things are taken for granted, about democracy, participation and so, but seeing also other realities around us, listening to the youth, we realize that we can lose everything so quickly ... our rights, our voice, our power, our participation ... so we are responsible to design the path, while we are walking. Let's see ... let's walk together!

[With many thanks to Boyka ZAGOROVA, Brigitte LUDMANN, Eylem CERTEL, Filippo LANGE, Gabriele CESPA, Georges ROSENBERG, Mario D'AGOSTINO, Nicholas PADDISON, Olafur OLASON, Veronique BERTHOLLE ... and to all our members and the ones who support us by participating within the network, because without them, Youth Express Network does not exist]

For more information: www.y-e-n.net ■

Contact : 

mateiromina@yahoo.co.uk 