



## Interview with Ólöf Ólafsdóttir

Former Director for Democratic Citizenship and Participation, Council of Europe

### → What are the main challenges facing young people in Europe today?

We have millions of young people out of employment, education and training, many of whom are well-educated and qualified. The challenge is to ensure that the next generation of young people are not prevented from becoming full members of our societies. So, social inclusion and well-being are certainly among the main goals for young people in Europe today.

To live a decent life, young people need: work, access to learning, opportunities to participate in all areas of their lives, healthy living conditions, access to culture and protection from discrimination and poverty. Happiness is often overlooked, but this, I would say, is also crucial for well-being.

### → And what do you think will be the main challenges for young people in 2020?

I hope that young people's futures will cease to be defined by the type of economic problems facing many countries

today. Demographic changes mean that young people in the labour market might have better opportunities, possibly on condition that they need to be prepared to be even more mobile than today. Consequently, the need to live successfully together in diverse and democratic societies will also be a major challenge. The protection and integration of minority groups of young people, of migrants and others will be another challenge.

**→ Do you think that the current policy agenda is relevant to these challenges?**

Many policy makers at both the Council of Europe and the European Union and in their member states have realised that greater attention must be paid to the challenges I have just described. As a result, there are plenty of political initiatives to master the economic crisis and foster democratic citizenship. Of course, looking at the scale of the crisis and the high number of excluded groups and disconnected regions, I would say that more needs to be done.

**→ How will the Council of Europe contribute to a better future for young people in 2020?**

The Council of Europe's mission is to protect and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law for all Europeans of any age. Decisions on its policies, programmes and priorities for young people are taken with young people themselves, through the Organisation's co-management structure, where youth leaders make decisions side by side with government representatives. The Organisation also has a designated youth department which runs projects specifically aimed at young people.

For example, we are coordinating an online youth campaign to combat hate speech – the No Hate Speech movement – which involves youth activists across Europe and aims to make cyberspace safer for young people. We have an ongoing project to improve social inclusion of young people – ENTER! – and are implementing the Roma Youth Action Plan, which supports probably the most marginalised group of young people in Europe. We have also created a network of Youth Peace Ambassadors throughout Europe.

We run regular workshops, seminars and training programmes for youth leaders – who then pass on what they have learnt to their associations – particularly in our two unique residential training centres, the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest. Our European Youth Foundation provides grants to youth NGOs and our Youth Policy Division fosters co-operation between the Council of Europe's 47 member states. We also work in partnership with the European Commission to improve youth policy and youth work.

**→ How can research contribute to informing the thinking and direction needed to face these challenges?**

It is crucial that both youth policy and practice are informed by research or better knowledge in a broader sense. We look for evidence, or knowledge-based (youth) policy. I prefer the term "knowledge" because it includes not only academic and scientific knowledge, but also the knowledge that comes from experience. We should not develop and implement any political strategy without basing it

on knowledge. The youth policy reviews of the Council of Europe are certainly a good example of how to gather such knowledge. I also appreciate the initiative taken by some of our member states to publish this series, *Perspectives on youth*, and the support for this project provided through our partnership with the European Commission. It will certainly help us to identify the challenges ahead.

**→ What quality of practice is required and delivered to face the challenges?**

I have already mentioned some of the quality projects the Council of Europe is running in the youth field: the No Hate Speech movement, the ENTER! project, the Roma Youth Action Plan and Youth Peace Ambassadors. These could be referred to as our flagship projects. However, our regular work programme is also closely monitored and evaluated to ensure high quality standards are met.

Of course we cannot tackle every challenge faced by young people. However, as we work mainly with youth leaders, we count on a snowball effect as they pass on their expertise, both in terms of quantity and quality. I think the No Hate Speech movement is a good example. As it will be run through national committees, it will reach out to many young people all over Europe.

**→ Out of the themes of the first volume of *Perspectives on youth*, which article were you prompted to read first and why?**

All the articles interested me in this first issue. The issue's theme – Youth in 2020 – is important and well chosen. I believe we need to look forward to the challenges ahead and find answers to these challenges. Given my concern about social exclusion, I will probably first look at the article on NEETs. As the Director for Education I would then look at the article on the social dimension of European higher education, followed by the other contributions.

**→ If you had a wish for young people in 2020, what would that be?**

My wish for 2020 would be for all young people to be able to live together in peace and harmony, respecting and having respected their human rights and democratic values, free from exclusion and discrimination. It is important that we do everything we can to reach these goals. I know this is a dream, but dreams have been realised in the past. Progress starts with a dream; there can be no progress without one.