

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



Reflection Group on youth participation – realities and needs

Draft Concept paper (07 April 2014)

1. Context

Youth participation has been largely and increasingly discussed over the last 40 years. Creation of youth related activities in the Council of Europe and then the European community, the adoption of the 'European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life'¹ (1992), the White Paper 'A new impetus for European Youth'² (2001), the Communication 'Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society'³ (2007) to are but a few stepping stones in this process. The European Union and the Council of Europe both evoke youth participation as a priority in their respective youth policy documents, the EU Youth Strategy and Agenda 2020. Many more political and other initiatives in both institutions as well as their member states have been undertaken. Other players in the youth field, particularly youth NGO's and the research community, also played a pivotal role in making the subject of youth participation a key topic and priority of European youth policies.

Today, participation 'is widely regarded an essential, if not the most important, principle of the democracies of our time, and European institutions and organisations

¹ Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, forerunner to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

² European Commission

³ Ibid

have repeatedly emphasised the importance of youth participation to foster young people's active citizenship, enhance their integration and inclusion and strengthen their contribution to the development of democracy"⁴.

The strong institutional commitments to promote youth participation in Europe also constitute an effort to address the widening gap between the quite dramatic decline in voting turnout and diminishing participation in formal political institutions, on the one hand, and generally high interest of young people in politics, resulting in shifting and novel patterns of political engagement, on the other hand. These two opposite trends are illustrated further by the paradox that, while public arenas for youth involvement appear to be more numerous than ever before, few would claim that these opportunities have amplified the participation of young people.

1.1 Youth participation in the Council of Europe⁵

From the outset, participation has been a central issue to the youth policy of the Council of Europe, expressed in the slogans "working for and with young people" or "nothing about us without us". It finds a formal dimension in the principle of co-management with decision-making shared equally between government officials and representatives of youth organisations. Thus participation is at the same time a goal, a principle and a practice in the work and philosophy of the youth sector of the Council of Europe., One of its purposes is to provide a specific contribution to the objectives of the organisation (Human Rights, Rule of Law and Democracy) and its capacity to develop appropriate responses to new situations and challenges.

In the early 1970s, when the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg and the European Youth Foundation were established, youth policy needed to find comprehensive and integrated strategies to the problems young people were facing. It is stated in the final text of the 2nd World Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth of the Council of Europe (1988): 'participation is more than involvement in institutions and decision-making. Participation is a pattern of how one lives in a democracy; it is relevant to work, housing, leisure, education and social relations'. In the same year, the Committee of Ministers adopted a report on 'Participation as a means of integrating young people at risk into society'. In 1992 and as a prelude to the "European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Municipal and Regional Life", the Council of Europe's Congress underlined that youth participation required a strong commitment to build a culture where young people are able to contribute in valuable and meaningful ways. The Charter was revised in 2003 taking into account new challenges faced by young people

⁴ European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy > Youth policy topics > Citizenship, participation and information

⁵ For further reading see: „The Council of Europe and youth – Thirty years of experience“ by Laurence Eberhard (2002)

in today's societies and following a reflection, initiated in 1999, on new forms of participation.

The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers in its Resolution(98) 6 on the Youth Policy of the Council of Europe (1998) stated that 'to encourage young people's participation in civil society was among the policy objectives and stipulated that the encouragement of new forms of youth participation and organization was one of its priorities'.

In its Resolution Res(2003)7 the Committee of Ministers reiterated that 'empowering young people to play an active role in the strengthening of civil society in Europe was one of the policy objectives. It also named participation and democratic citizenship of young people, as one of thematic priorities for the years ahead, with special emphasis on, among others: young people's participation in and access to democratic institutions and processes, in particular those from disadvantaged and minority groups; the reduction of barriers to youth participation, at local, regional, national and European levels; the establishment and proper functioning of democratic youth bodies representing young people and non-governmental youth organisations, at local, regional and national levels'.

Today's youth policy of the youth sector in the Council of Europe is based on the Declaration of the 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth which took place in Kyiv, Ukraine, in 2008: 'The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020". Under the heading "Human rights and democracy" ministers regard as a key priority to promote "young people's active participation in democratic processes and structures and equal opportunities for the participation of all young people in all aspects of their everyday lives'.

As a consequence of the above mentioned documents youth participation is a key topic in the work programme of the Council of Europe youth sector, particularly by promoting the participation of young people and children at local, regional and national levels and by empowering young people from vulnerable groups and enhancing their participation through education and youth work.

In addition to the above-mentioned processes, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe has recently strengthened its activities around the topic of participation and made citizen participation a priority for 2013-2016. In 2012 the Congress published the report 'Youth and democracy: the changing face of youth political engagement'; it shows that contrary to popular belief young people have not disengaged from democratic engagement but they participate differently.

In view of emerging new forms of participation a new report is now envisaged which will take a different look at youth participation and explore how local and regional

authorities can engage with young people and promote their participation beyond the traditional models of youth councils.

1.2 Youth participation in the European Union

After having made youth participation a key topic in the already mentioned White Paper 'A new impetus for European Youth' (2001) and having developed a broad concept of youth consultations on topics that concern young people, the European Commission broadened its understanding of youth participation and orientate itself towards a concept of a knowledge-based, cross-sectorial and participatory youth policy, which represents today's understanding of youth policy in the European Union discourses.

Already earlier the European Commission has been prioritizing the promotion of active European citizenship and participation in its non-formal learning programmes, starting with the Youth for Europe programme in 1989 (1989-1999), YOUTH (2000-2006), Youth in Action (2007-2013) and now Erasmus+ Youth (2014-2010).

In 2006, the European Commission adopted a communication on active European citizenship of young people, COM(2006) 147 final to promote a structured dialogue with young people.

Further, the European Commission adopted in 2007 a communication 'Promoting Young People's Full Participation in Education, Employment and Society' which develops a rather broad concept of youth participation in various environments in which young people live. The communication states that working towards young people's full participation requires a transversal youth strategy and outlines steps in that direction, including the open method of coordination and a reinforced process of structured dialogue from local to regional and national and to the European level.

The most recent relevant documents on youth policy in the European Union are the Communication from the Commission 'An EU Strategy for Youth: Investing and Empowering - A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities' (2009) and the subsequent Council Resolution. The strategy outlines key priorities for the period 2010-2018, in which participation is one out of eight fields of action.

The EU youth strategy sets on two overall objectives:

- to provide more and equal opportunities for young people in education and in the job market; and
- to encourage young people to actively participate in society.

Ways to achieve these objectives include a) the development of mechanisms for engaging in dialogue with young people and facilitating their participation in the shaping of national policies, b) the support of youth organisations, including local and national youth councils, c) the promotion of participation by under-represented groups of young people in politics, youth organisations, and other civil society organisations and d) the support of ways of "learning to participate" from an early age. The strategy also includes the structured dialogue between policy and young people as a key instrument to foster youth participation in European and national level youth policies.

The 2012 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the renewed framework states that 'Youth participation has figured prominently on the EU youth policy agenda in recent years. Participation is key to youth policy in all Member States and many activities have been carried out, including the development of structures for involving young people in decision-making and review of the quality of participatory mechanisms. Activities were also undertaken to promote wider involvement of youth in participation, including production of relevant information material and room for more dialogue online'.

The Council confirmed its dedication to this field by making 'youth participation in democratic life' the overall priority of the second Trio Presidency in the youth field (mid 2011-2012). It also adopted a resolution on new and effective forms of participation of all young people in democratic life in Europe. The so-called structured dialogue has become an increasingly influential instrument for involving young people in decision-making. It is currently undergoing modifications based on the evaluation run in 2013.

The Commission also took steps to strengthen the evidence base on participation through the 2011 Flash Eurobarometer on 'Youth on the Move', 2013 Flash Eurobarometer on 'European Youth: Participation in Democracy' and a report on evidence from Eurobarometer surveys conducted in 2012 on 'Political Participation and EU Citizenship: Perceptions and Behaviours of Young People'⁶. Moreover, a study on changing patterns of youth participation 'Youth Participation in Democratic Life' was conducted by the London School of Economics on behalf of the European Commission (February 2013). The latter study produced several policy recommendations around the themes: youth representation; youth engagement in policy and politics; (e)voting; creativity, innovation and participation; traditional/new media and youth participation; social exclusion and youth participation.

2. The current debates on youth participation

In view of changing realities and the so-called economic crisis that encompasses political and cultural dimensions, it is a popular belief that young people are disengaging from democratic and civic behaviour. Many young people seem to be

⁶ Produced by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission

disillusioned; some behave in undemocratic, xenophobic and discriminatory manners while others look for nothing but their own professional careers. However, this is only one side of the medal. Even if young people may be more distant to traditional, conventional forms of democratic engagement, in nearly all political and civic movements over the last years they played a prominent role; some of these movements led to quite radical political changes, be it the 'Arab spring' or the Ukrainian political crisis. Also, recent studies show that the democratic values are still strong and that young people's participation in political processes continues though in different and new ways, e.g. through signing petitions, conscious consumerism, dressing up, graffiti, making verbal and visual statements online and in social media, but as well in flash mobs and street performances, stunts, protest, demonstrations and sometimes riots. Young people engage in different forms of democratic activities that respond to their own understanding of democracy and citizenship and find different ways of making their voices heard.

These findings are shared by the report of the Congress on 'Youth and Democracy' (2012) of 2012, the European Commission's Youth Report (2012), the final report of the study "Youth Participation in Democratic Life" (LSE 2013) as well as the replies of EU Member States to the questionnaires used for the European Youth Report analysed by the EU-CoE youth partnership.

But the debate is not only about participation in democratic life and in representative political structures. It is also about the question how marginalized young people do in terms of social inclusion, how they can actively participate in education, employment and society at large and how they can manage their transition to adulthood and an autonomous life. It is also about ensuring that all young people have an equal access to well-being and can participate in all spheres of their lives. Some elements for discussion can be grouped around the study of Eurofound 'NEETs - Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe' (2012), which aims at investigating the current situation of young people in Europe, focusing specifically on those who are not in employment, education or training, and understanding the economic and social consequences of their disengagement from the labour market and education..

Consequently, Member States and European institutions need to identify which forms of participation meet the demands of young people and provide them with diverse forms of support. Adequate structures, tools and methods are needed for this to happen. This concerns for instance the use of social media and information and communication technologies ('e-participation'), but not exclusively. Also youth work is invited to develop new approaches and ideas to find adequate answers to the questions raised. The recently published study 'Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union' provides some insights in this regard by highlighting the impact of youth work for young people for their personal development (self-

determination, self-confidence, self-esteem, socialisation) and their participation and social inclusion.

3. Purpose of the reflection group on Youth Participation

Despite the fact that there are – as described above – numerous political and research documents, as well as good practice examples, it seems to be quite difficult to keep track of the state of affairs in the reflections and discussions on youth participation. The EU-CoE youth partnership has therefore planned in its 2014 (and potentially in the following years) work plan to continue focusing on the topic of youth participation. This will allow following up on the work done on the topic by both partner institutions, such as the LSE report on 'Youth Participation and in Democratic Life', commissioned by the European Commission, and the Finnish Youth Research Network report 'Youth Participation, Good Practices in Different Forms of Regional and Local Democracy', commissioned by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. This will also deepen the reflections on youth participation matters carried out in the framework of the EU-CoE youth partnership so far, particularly in the 2013 activities (e.g. the symposium 'The Current Crisis and Youth – Impact and Ways Forward', Strasbourg; the conference 'Youth in 2020', Budapest; the seminar 'Youth and Citizenship – focus on participation', Jordan; the symposium 'Youth Policy with EECA countries on the role of youth work in education for democratic citizenship and participation' in Yerevan, etc.).

It is foreseen to first draft an analytical paper summarizing the state of affairs in the debates around the topic of youth participation (what is being done?) and stating further needs (what needs to be done?). In a second stage policy briefs providing conclusions as a result of the reflections and the analytical paper will be drafted and largely disseminated. Thus an overview of current and upcoming challenges will be elaborated (including those related to the so-called economic crisis and access to the labour market) and new models of participation and ways of promoting them identified. The state of play in young people's situations, needs and aspirations, related policies, practice examples, tendencies and prognosis will be considered.

As a very first step a small core group of researchers, policy makers and youth work practitioners (10-12 participants) is invited to reflect on which sub-topics the analytical paper should cover and what the scope and structure of a following reflection seminar (of approximately 40 experts) should be. This will be followed by contracting experts for drafting the paper. Its results are to be discussed in a seminar of the reflection group seminar on youth participation of young people in Europe, leading to a number of conclusions and recommendations.

Some guiding questions are:

- When looking at all the work that has been done, which (political) conclusions can we draw and what still needs to be done?

- Is our perception and understanding of what participation means accurate or is it too limited? Does it go beyond political participation and citizenship? How new and alternative forms of engagement and the use of new social media is considered?
- What new participatory structures, tools and innovative approaches exist or need to be developed with regard to participation, taking into account all spheres of life of young people, such as economic, cultural, social, civic... ?
- How can those structures, tools and approaches improve the inclusion for all and outreach also to vulnerable groups?

4. Cooperation partners:

SALTO Participation Resource Centre, European Youth Forum (YFJ), Advisory Council on Youth, Pool of European Youth Researchers / research community, community of youth workers and trainers, youth policy (European Steering Group on Youth in the Council of Europe / Youth Working Party in the Council of the European Union).

5. Expected outcomes:

- Analytical paper summarizing the state of affairs in the debates around the topic of participation (what is being done?) and stating further needs (what needs to be done?)
- Policy brief providing conclusions as a result of the reflections and the analytical paper.

6. Process/Timeline:

Week 16 (15-16 April)

First consultative meeting of a small reflection group: finalisation of the concept, identification of themes for analytical paper, first reflection on structure and agenda of the reflection seminar of experts

Week 16 (17 April)

Targeted call for experts for drafting the analytical paper (deadline for applications 30 April)

Week 17 (by 25 April)

Call for experts for reflection group meeting in June / July + call for facilitator and rapporteur

Week 18 (by 2 May)

Provision of analytical paper

Week 27 (30 June – 4 July)

Reflection meeting with experts / representatives of research, policy and practice

Week 28 (by 11 July)

Recommendations and conclusions

2015

The reflection on youth participation may continue, based on the outcomes of 2014.