

Peer Learning MCP Participation

Inspirational paper

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„Participation of young people in the democratic Europe”**
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I Report and main findings of the 1st meeting of the MCP

Opening seminar „Participation of young people in the democratic Europe“ (24th – 25th April 2013, Berlin)

Background

Starting point for initiating the *MCP Participation* is the EU Youth Strategy (see: COUNCIL RESOLUTION of 27th November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)). For its implementation in Germany, the federal and state youth ministries (“Bund” and “Länder”) agreed on three content areas (so called "themed corridors") while one of them is "To promote participation and to strengthen democracy." The issues of "participation" should relate not only to new target groups and deal with an extended impact. Also new forms of participation and instruments should be developed and tested, best practise should be implemented. The claim "To strengthen democracy" is based on the assumption that the culture of participation can be improved in Germany through an enhanced dialogue of young people and decision makers in the field of relevant policy processes for young people. Particularly disadvantaged target groups and young people with fewer opportunities are to be reached and involved.

For a wider understanding of the two objectives of the themed corridor "participation", peer learning processes among experts from youth work and youth policy, two *Multilateral Cooperation Projects (MCP)* are currently supported at the federal level:

- *MCP "youth part"* looks for new formats in the area of e-participation

- *MCP "Participation of young people in the democratic Europe"* enables an exchange of methods and concepts, which manage to reach less active, particularly disadvantaged target groups.

While focussing on peer learning among experts and including a commitment of the existing expertise from international contexts, both projects aim at new discoveries, recommendations and guidelines which can be incorporated into the debate, respective national processes and the current work contexts of the cooperation partners.

Course of the seminar

For the opening meeting on 24th – 25th April 2013 in Berlin, nineteen experts from the United Kingdom, Poland, Lithuania, Israel* and Germany were invited to talk about the aims of youth participation and appropriate approaches from different point of views according to the background of national experience.

* Unfortunately, Israel was not able to send a delegation to the first seminar.

For the purpose of peer learning, the first seminar of the planned cycle brought together a winning composition of stakeholders in the field of youth work and youth policy. Besides practitioners from NGOs and youth organisations, representatives of ministries for youth as well youth researchers, youth information/ press and young official mandate holders, e.g. members from the national youth council and parliament or the youth representation officer at the Mayor's office, were invited.

Regarding youth participation in the respective countries, the following issues were discussed:

Definitions, concepts and attitudes towards participation, the role of young people in the society and vice versa

Current practices and approaches for an effective dialogue between young people and politics, conditions and access for different target groups

The quality of implementation approaches, criteria for sustainable participation – as well as in social and political terms.

At the beginning Sven-Olaf Obst (BMFSFJ)* and Jochen Butt-Pośnik, Youth for Europe, Transfer Agency for Youth Policy Cooperation in Europe set the framework to start the international peer learning process and introduced into the background of the MCP.

To assure a common work base for the MCP, the first seminar focused on the notion of participation as a main area of youth policy and on the general question of how to reach different target groups, especially young people with fewer opportunities. The following substantive inputs of two German experts helped to introduce the discussions and workshops from a theoretical perspective:

- “Challenges in youth participation – a German perspective” (by Benedikt Widmaier, Director of the Academy of the educational institution *Haus am Maiberg*)
- “Reaching out for all youth in civiv education” (by Wiebke Kohl, *German Federal Agency for Civic Education*, Section “Apolitical Target groups”).

During the course of the seminar, the participants made visible and explained the different national circumstances, concepts and the implications for various educational approaches and political strategies. The theoretical debate among the participants was directed to the differences of social and political participation and the general discussion whether there is such a difference at all and if so, which would be the impact. It was agreed to pursue this issue - the influence of social participation on the motivation for political activities as a possible spill-over effect – in the further course of the following MCP meetings.

As a result of the first seminar, it became apparent that on the one hand Poland and Lithuania having passed an intensive transformation process after communism emphasize the civic citizenship dimension of social participation, whereas in England and Germany participation is more seen and implemented in its political impact.

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II Youth Participation – core elements

Concept of Youth Participation - political vs. social dimensions?

Youth participation includes participation of young people in all issues which directly affect them and their environment in the context of political decision-making processes, especially with a focus on the local and community level. Young people want to be active themselves and be part of the society. The more active young people are allowed to be, the greater their willingness is to commit to social and political involvement.

Most young people are not uninterested in politics or political issues in general, but they miss appropriate matching approaches. It is easier for them to get first involved in social areas in their every day life. According to certain youth researchers an active social engagement is often understood as a sufficient criterion for subsequent active political participation. Only there is a lack of bridging structures, which lead to political participation. So far, youth research is not able to give an ultimate answer to the question, if there is such a spill-over effect from social engagement towards political participation. Definitions and concepts of active citizenship, civic and political participation are not sufficiently clear-cut and often merging. Finally, all forms of participation have a political dimension, therefore youth participation should proactively include the political implications.

A similar definition gap applies to the context of learning active citizenship, democracy and participation. Certainly, formal and non-formal learning contexts and the communities themselves play an essential role for the development of youth participation: on the one hand as an important political training ground and on the other as a genuine arena for action and ensures a direct impact to the everyday life of young people. On the base of a wider understanding of the notion of policy and politics, participation takes place in a variety of contexts and areas on the border between the political system and the society. In this sense political participation is not strictly limited to its dimension of formal political processes, but includes the policy sphere and socio-political culture as well.

Youth participation obtains multilateral dimensions, which can be described as “formal” and “non formal” participation in different fields of action with two directions:

a. Political dimension,

Formal participation in structures of the political system (e.g. membership in a political party, being the official representative of the youth) and

Non formal participation in the political culture of the civil society (e.g. projects, hearings, demonstrations)

b. Social dimension

Formal participation in social structures of the society (e.g. membership in an NGO)

Non formal participation in the social culture of the civil society (e.g. social activities, volunteering)

The distinguishing criteria are primarily in the duration and shape of the engagement (short-or long-term, project-oriented or in the structures) as well as the agenda-setting of the issues (political or social content). Furthermore, youth participation involves a wide breadth of methods from not serious approaches like manipulation and decoration to youth information, consultation to co-decision making. In that context, the „ladder of participation“ (Sherry Arnstein 1969; Rodger Hardt 1997) can be used as a suitable model for evaluating the quality of youth participation models.

Youth Participation is the “imperative of democracy”

The democratic society has to pay special attention to bottom up processes and to the will of citizens to engage with issues of society, to form views about them, to interact with policy makers, to argue, to be inspired and find support for their own ideas. Children’s and young people’s concerns should be respected for the same reasons adults are respected. To become an active citizen, a person has to be ‘trained’ at an early age by being allowed to participate.

Against the background of demographic and social change youth participation requires possibilities for young people to get involved specifically in the political process, also, that includes the following precepts for successful participation.

- Young people have participation rights.
- Each generation has to study the principles of democracy and civilisations rights from the basics.
- Youth participation needs sufficient time, supporting structures, professional accompaniment by youth workers and adults, and a clear political will.
- Young people must feel they are participating, therefore they must feel treated at eye-level with rights and with respect to their genuine identity.
- Youth participation can only be successful if young people get open access to (local) systems and official bodies and their input has to be welcomed and seen as a positive impact on the whole society.
- Youth participation means interaction of generations and needs a dialogue between youth and politics.

Youth Participation implicates both – acting and education

Active citizenship and youth participation cannot develop without a learning process of young people, which requires specific learning situations in order to prepare and support young people as well as train their necessary skills and competencies.

Projects and non formal learning settings play an important role. A subject and resource-oriented approach is an important element of non-formal learning processes in general, but especially in the framework of youth participation projects. The respectful treatment of participants in the context of youth work motivates them to participate actively in a project and offers them new learning experiences, where participants can engage themselves. This requires qualified youth workers who treat the participants seriously.

There is not *one* way of participation

The diversity of young people requires many different approaches in order to involve young people and foster youth participation. The type of participation depends on the age and has to be guided by the possibilities of the specific needs of each target group and the local conditions. Since youth participation is focussed on a voluntary involvement, it is important for young people to have a choice among various forms of participation. In community settings political participation can take a wide variety of shapes and be implemented in several different ways:

- *Representative forms of participation*
Institutions with elected or appointed young people who represent “young” interests; e.g. school or youth councils, youth parliaments, young mayors
- *Open, direct forms of participation*
Involve free and spontaneous access to all interested children and young people; e.g. online local initiative channel, youth hearings, youth forums
- *Project-based forms of participation*
Time-limited projects, which affect young people or emerge from youth initiatives; e.g. establishing meeting places for young people or online platforms
- *Advocacy-based forms of participation*
Adults representing the interests of children and young people; e.g. youth offices and youth commissioners
- *Presence/ consultation of children and young people in adult decision-making bodies*
Direct involvement of children and young people or their views in adult-run decision-making bodies, sometimes with voting rights; e.g. district working groups, city councils, e-participation offers.

Competent youth work is the key condition for successful youth participation

Young people consider it important that they participate voluntarily, they are actively included in the organisation and execution of projects and processes and, at the same time, they encounter with other young people. Therefore youth work offers conditions, settings and educational approaches for successful citizenship learning and for participation projects, in a more efficient way than school does. When young people are directly involved in a project, social and political issues become clearer to them. Furthermore, they view that their practical commitment is relevant in the democratic society. Authentic settings and persons which young people face in participation projects broaden their horizons, as well in terms of development of their competencies, skills and capabilities.

Participation projects in the framework of youth work are characterized by activating approaches, action-based methods and peer group learning processes, in order to enable young people to gain new experiences and to actively take part in the society. Regardless of which approach is taken, the following conditions for successful youth participation are important:

- Accessible language for young people on all issues
- Involvement in all political processes which young people are capable of passing judgment
- Young people must be aware of their role in the process of political decision making
- Political decision makers should respect the role of young people in the process
- Without challenges and a real action field young people start to be bored
- Policy makers must be willing to leave the decision-making power to young people in particular areas and provide the relevant resources available for their activities
- Young people should have the right to do things in a different way than adults

In addition to verbal based participation processes, medial and artistic means of expressions are very important for young people. Particularly focusing on barely approachable young people and on young people with special needs, these creative methods play a key function due to the empowerment function they offer.

Participation projects and dialogue processes between young people and politics require time, endurance and continuity in order to develop gainfully. This is sometimes difficult for young people preferring a different speed of the regular political processes. Therefore leaders of youth work play an important role for the processes as both mediators and as educators.

The European Youth Policy means a tailwind for Youth Participation

Throughout the consultation process and the resulting White Paper entitled “A New Impetus for Europe’s Youth”, since 2001 the European Commission has repeatedly given high priority to the promotion of youth participation in all Member States. After the Treaty of Lisbon came into force on 1st December 2009, the rights of the child were included in Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in all EU Member States and their right to participation was enshrined in paragraph 1. Still, even after Lisbon the European Union plays merely a complementary, albeit actively coordinating, role. The Commission’s EU Youth Strategy (2010-2018) is a comprehensive, ambitious programme, in order to strengthen youth participation and active citizenship of young people in the European Union.

Depending on the field of youth participation various methods which derive from the youth work are effective. Overall, dialogue formats play an important role for an authentic interaction between youth and politics. In this context, projects of the Structured Dialogue in the framework of the Youth Strategy of the European Union are of particular interest when it comes to the sustainable promotion of youth participation in the member states of the EU. Despite extensive knowledge on youth participation, new impulses and a good political framework, a certain stagnation

concerning the long term implementation of participation can be observed; often youth participation is reduced to projects of the EU funding program, rather than further support from the national, regional and local youth policy makers.

III Recommendations for sustainable Youth participation towards politics and towards youth work

The main objective of the MCP is the development of joint recommendations. For this purpose, below some general conclusions are drawn from the debate of the first seminar. This starting point should help to give advice and to work out practical areas, which could strengthen and improve youth participation in the partner countries. For the elaboration of recommendations, one should keep in mind, that there is no 'Participation as such'. Participation means rights, structures, and processes and is always linked to specific stakeholders and their projects.

Learning Democracy and Youth Participation are mutually linked with each other

Learning Democracy and *Youth Participation* are important for the socialization of young people and are mutually linked. At the one hand Learning democracy aims at a better participation in society and politics, at the other hand while taking part in participation projects democracy becomes better understandable for young people.

Learning democracy means an interactive confrontation with one's own role in society and an individual and critical reflection of the underlying values. Learning democracy aims at civic participation as an active involvement in society, and provides therefore the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies. In principle, learning democracy is understood as a life long learning process. Since this includes practical training, participation cannot be regarded only as a theoretical issue, but has to be practiced at the same time in reality. In order to strengthen youth responsibility for democracy by education and youth work, tolerance, the way of democratic decision-making and non-violent conflict resolution are to be in the focus.

- Participation projects should receive sufficient support and resources for the implicit democratic learning process.

Participation requires a deeper understanding of the basic democratic values

The confrontation with one's own identity is the starting point in being able to have a say in social and policy making processes.

In principle, an individual interpretation of each pattern and a personal biographical background determinate the Learning democracy process a lot. Therefore, one's own identity, mutual respect and esteem play an important role in the concept of participation. Without a deeper understanding of the basic democratic values,

participation is in danger of pure activism. In this context, the experience of self-efficacy is crucial for the development of a *democratic identity*. That means a reasonable identification with the fundamental values of democracy, allowing both: the maximum use of personal freedoms for oneself as well as for others.

- Learning Participation in the sense of a holistic 'Education for Democracy' should focus on the identity of young people and their responsibility for democracy; therefore learning participation should not only take place in projects of youth work but also be linked to curricular activities at school.

Responsibility for democracy implies dialogue between youth and politics

Since democracy cannot be reduced to the political system and formal political participation, communication and interaction between politicians and the citizens are the precondition of a modern democratic society. Increasing political apathy among young people and the lack of future prospects in the face of the economic crises on the one hand and growing protest movements and radicalization on the other hand, require a general and open debate on the political culture of the society and on new formats of democratic co-decision making. Apart from the political will, supporting and empowering educational "enablers" are needed in order to involve especially the young generation and to gain their motivation for having a say.

- Dialogue projects between youth and political stakeholders should be part of the process of learning democracy. However, if youth participation is taken seriously on all sides and should go beyond a pure consultation function, there must be something "real" to decide.