A golden triangle on white chairs

An (atypical) interview on youth information and counselling in South-Eastern Europe from a youth policy, research and practice perspective

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INTERVIEW FACT SHEET

The setting: Youth policy co-operation in South-East Europe, "Symposium on the role of information and counselling in fostering young people's social inclusion and access to their rights" organised by the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth of Croatia, ERYICA and SALTO RC SEE

Dates: 19 and 20 June 2013

Interviewees: Ante Martic (policy), Sladjana Petkovic (research), Zoran Ilieski and Jan Kulenovic (practice)

Duration of interviews: 30 min to 90 min

Interview locations: coffee shop outside the symposium hotel/ corridor outside plenary room/hotel restaurant

Photo opportunity location: white chairs on 1st floor lobby

I should start by saying that what you will read below is not a typical interview. It is actually four different conversations driven by curiosity: if we are in a symposium on youth information and counselling in South-Eastern Europe, what makes this region so special and what are the common (if there are any) challenges, wishes or opportunities regarding youth information and counselling among countries in this region? This curiosity pushed me to look for "free" moments during the symposium to talk with four different people representing what we call the "golden triangle" of youth work.

If you are also curious, read below to see what I found out.

CECI N'EST PAS UN TRIANGLE

If the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about a triangle is geometry or a (special) love affair, you are not too wrong, but you might be missing something there. Using the term "golden triangle" in youth work is a reference to the interrelationship that exists (or should exist) between youth policy, practice and research. The geometrical form of a triangle designates the way these three aspects of youth work are linked to each other and represents what I would call a "holistic approach" to youth issues. There is of course debate concerning the accuracy of the term, since some argue that this "golden triangle" needs to be enlarged to a square incorporating youth organisations and young people.[1] But this is another conversation. Let's concentrate on our triangle.

The principle behind the symposium held in Zagreb was actually to bring actors from all three fields (remember the triangle corners) together. Even if youth policy makers, practitioners and researchers work in the same field, they rarely have the opportunity to sit at the same table, exchange views or nurture each other's work. This becomes even more complicated at the international level. Accepting this reality, just the fact of being at this symposium seems to be a kind of a privilege and triggers even more my "curiosity conversations".

Curiosity conversation #1: from practice to policy?

The first person I talked to was Ante Martic in a coffee shop outside the symposium hotel. It is quite an untypical interview since I knew Ante from the past when he was working for the European Youth Forum in Brussels. Ante is today Head of the Sector for Youth at the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth in Croatia. "But my experience comes from my NGO work and the European Youth Forum," he said. Coming back to Croatia from Brussels, Ante worked for the youth information centre in Rijeka and then joined the public administration and worked in the co-ordinating institution for civil society. "When in 2011 there was a political decision to create a strong youth sector, they proposed me to take this position given my experience on the local, national and international level. When I was working for the youth NGO sector I never thought I would do this, but, as you understand, I couldn't say no."

I then asked Ante what was the situation of youth policy in his country. "In Croatia, for the last 20 years the youth sector was somehow neglected and most of the developments have been the result of grass-roots initiatives or financed through tenders for projects coming from EU funds and embassies. In the mid-2000s the scene developed but still youth policy was not articulated in an inclusive or sustainable way. There was no commitment to developing a proper legislative framework – what was there was more of a strategy than a real policy. While youth organisations and activities were developing in many directions at the same time, the main priority of the institutional support in recent years went around the creation of a legislative framework (a law for youth) that could be translated into a sustainable and evidence-based approach to youth policy."

I wondered how his practical experience had helped him in his current role. He answered with a smile that "for years I was on the other side of the equation and this has helped me to learn the processes".

1. http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/youth-partnership/documents/Publications/Coyote/16/arriving.pdf (date accessed 31.07.2013)

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Curiosity conversation #2: I need an example of what happens in practice

I joined Zoran Ilieski for lunch on the second day of the symposium. Zoran is Executive Director of the National Coalition of Youth Organisations (SEGA) in the "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". "During the last four years, we have been trying to develop a youth information system and mechanisms that will provide opportunities for young people to be in touch with the information they need. We need to take into consideration that in the country there was no previous experience nor any memory of this compared to other European countries," he explained.

By becoming a partner of EYRICA they tried to use different tools from information centres in other European countries and to negotiate with the government. "But the first steps were very difficult," he said, "as nobody knew what you were talking about, and they couldn't understand the value of information systems". Today, "the issue of youth information is still unknown by the stakeholders, the government, as well as young people themselves," he explained. In 2010 they opened the first youth information and counselling centre in Prilep. The local government has provided the facilities but the financial support from the central government was only guaranteed for a year. "Although there is a political commitment to open youth information, there is no financial implication in the government's budget," he said.

Curiosity conversation #3: one more example from practice, please

I approached Jan Kulenović because my curiosity drove me to ask for another example from a practice perspective. Jan made a presentation during the symposium on good practices in the field of employment and entrepreneurship and – allow me to be subjective at this point – what he said was quite motivating. Jan is the Executive Director and Founder of the Youth Information Agency (OIA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which works for the improvement of the position of young people and their participation in society. "I need to put it into context," he said when I asked him to explain me how the agency was founded. "Twelve years ago, when the agency was founded, the key players in the youth sector were international organisations because of the post-conflict and transition period." Therefore, the Open Society Fund, as part of their youth strategy, established a year-long strategy that afterwards evolved into an NGO with youth information as one of its pillars of work. "There was no and there is still no government support; funding comes from international organisations," he explained. Jan mentioned that "since the beginning we are trend-setters for a lot of different tools and approaches," he explained and added that "all our activities are improving the situation of youth officers, teachers in schools and politicians; it is a constant, ongoing process". In his opinion, what is important right now is to focus on more co-ordinated and individualised programmes in the field of youth employment (entrepreneurship, career counselling, mentorship programmes) and he explained that in his country, in 2012, they opened an innovative social innovation incubator which created synergies between different activities (information points, mentorship, start-up support, networking space) which reached around 2 000 young people in Sarajevo. "This is an interesting model that, in co-operation with other experts, can be transferable to other contexts or communities," he said.

Curiosity conversation #4: what is the role of research in this direction?

"I could say that I am one of the pioneers when it comes to the promotion and development of youth information in ex-Yugoslavia, especially Serbia and Montenegro," said Sladjana when I asked her to present herself. "I was one of the trained youth workers and counsellors and I worked at the local and national levels first to raise awareness of decision makers and create opportunities, like services within existing organisations such as the Office for Prevention of Drug Abuse." Sladjana has experience in youth work from a practice point of view, but today she is a researcher in the youth field and one of the experts of the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy.[2] At the moment of the interview she told me that she is doing a policy, institutional and legal analysis which is going to identify gaps in different areas of youth employment and participation in the region. Based on this research and other input, a specific programme is going to be supported by the United Nations. This sounds promising, but is it really effective? Sladjana thinks that "research needs to be put in the agenda – it is the starting point". "From my experience and from the recent UN point of view, what has been highlighted as a main obstacle for low youth motivation and participation was lack of access to information," she added. "Youth information and counselling are the priority needs of young people in all policy areas, especially when it comes to youth employment and participation; however, there is a lack of capacities of public institutions to answer to these burning needs and in Montenegro for example, international institutions are taking over," said Sladjana.

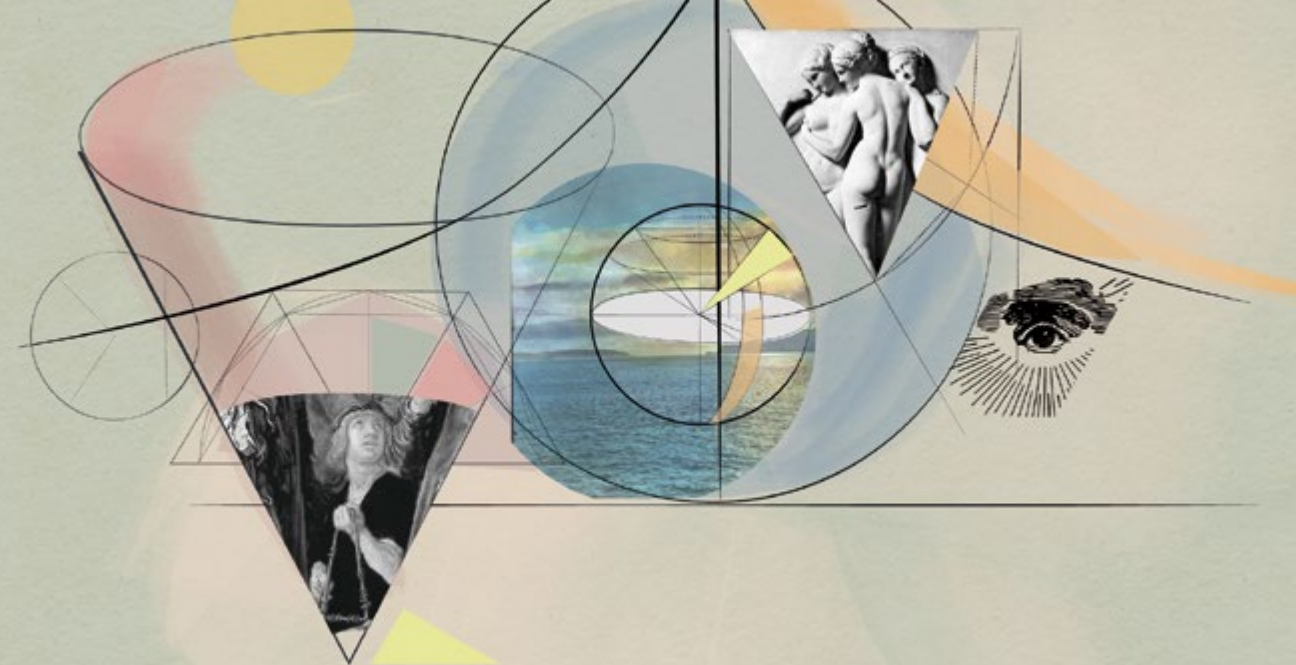2. http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/youth-partnership/ekcyp/index

Talking about challenges

All four curiosity conversations evolved around the issue of challenges faced in the region concerning youth information and counselling. Zoran thinks that "youth information in the region is at a starting point" and "young people in the region don't know they have the right to information". Jan mentioned that the disadvantaged position of young people, the lack of an institutional framework (recognising that maybe in Croatia there is one, but quite new) are among the common challenges in the region. "We still have to fight and to promote why youth information is needed instead of working on next steps of defining creative ways and approaches to youth information; it is a pre-period where we still fight for recognition", he said.

Ante underlined that "first of all there is a big problem of understanding the added value of this kind of work" and he explained that "in many countries of SEE, young people are seen through a prism of prevention and protection instead of participation and empowerment. Efforts to help young people with their self-orientation or involving them in decision making are often seen as encouraging political ambitions. Politicians need to see quick and final results."

Although SEE countries share geographical and historical connections, Ante mentioned that "the situation in South-East Europe is different from country to country" and added that "in Serbia for example there has been a lot of work in terms of legislation; there are youth agencies and offices on the local level and an umbrella organisation for youth organisatons has been put into place with state support". Croatia's integration into the EU has also allowed youth information centres to connect a lot with Eurodesk and other international networks, while still working with counterparts in the region. Ante feels that Croatia has the responsibility to transfer its experience to other EU candidate countries within the region. "All Balkan countries are aspiring members, the question is only about the speed, but sooner or later they will join the EU and Croatia can offer a lot of advice based on our experience."

Lack of funds was a problem identified by all of them. However, Jan underlined that, from a practical point of view, "the contribution that we need primarily from governments is not only through budget allocations but it can also be through infrastructure support, creating the space for official links between youth practice and information provision with the school system and support to NGOs and conditions that can create long-term co-operation between the educational system, employers and the private sector".

A triangle in need of its corners

Can a triangle be solid if there is no communication and co-operation between its corners? This was a question that bothered all the interviewees and my curiosity drove me to find some answers on what could be done.

"Policy, especially in the region, needs to come down from the ivory tower," said Ante and added that "the only way to do it is by establishing an inclusive, sustainable and participatory process that involves the practitioners, otherwise policy is only created to provide a framework for a portion of the population to enjoy their rights, while the ones dealing with implementation or working with a certain target group know best the technical and content needs when it comes to youth information and counselling".

Ante commented that in Croatia there is an effort to connect research with policy and practice. They engage researchers in dealing with strategic and legal documents. They also did extensive research on youth needs and they based the new national youth programme on the results. But as Ante noted, there are some limitations to research outcomes, "especially when it is ordered research, it depends who commissioned it," he said. Another problem that he identified is that research needs to be inclusive of the real population it examines and that if there are no satisfactory data, then the research is not complete. "In recent decades, every five years the different is huge, therefore we need full insight and updated data, we cannot rely on selective ones," he added.

Zoran thinks that youth research is one of the issues to be included as a permanent practice in youth work in order to ensure real information on the needs of young people. "In that direction, in my country there is no youth information research and having information on the topics, the quality and type of information that young people need will allow us (practitioners) to better define the approach on how to deliver it to them," he said.

For Zoran, what practitioners need from policy makers is "strong political commitment for youth information and allocating the specific budget for youth information support". But he underlined that the issue of "how to put youth information on the priority list of politicians, since they are the people that take decisions" remains one of the challenges for practitioners. Zoran considers that the support of the Council of Europe and other international institutions could be valuable in order to involve deeper the politicians through recommendations to the government.

"A research project done by the UN, 'The voice of youth', was an example of how we occasionally need concrete, evidence-based statistics and analysis. It is interesting to see from a research point of view how they access this information and with a quality analysis we can decide which approach is more suitable," said Jan. However, what he pointed out was that, "there is no structured approach to research, it happens ad hoc and it's pretty improvised, that's why I am not sure that this type of ad hoc information exchange can really have any impact".

"Evidence-based decision making is super important, the role of research in this direction is super important, but what is most important is the communication between the famous triangle," underlined Sladjana. Luckily, symposiums like this one try to promote of this kind of communication that is so needed.

Wishful thinking?

For Ante, the ideal information and counselling service would be "a space with little or no boundaries, a welcoming place where young people would come and get what they need without administrative burdens. A youth-friendly place with peer communication, liberated from prejudice. It cannot be a place where you are judged. It's place where people can find shelter from their own worries. And of course it needs to be well equipped in technical terms and with a well-trained staff."

Zoran said with a smile that he wishes "that small villages have a youth information point as a structure – especially for those young people who want to have a future to live in the village".

Jan foresees that "youth information in the next years will be influenced by new technologies – just think that five years ago in 2008, almost no one in Bosnia was using Facebook, therefore it is difficult to predict". For him, youth information needs "to be immediately looking and updated towards new technologies and in close co-operation with young people, but what will stay the same is the need for a youth-friendly language and approach".

"Youth information should be put on the agenda. I mean seriously. I am not sure how, but the EU and other international institutions can help to pressure governments in order to prioritise the issue. Then we should seriously analyse existing resources, see what public institutions offer and what they can offer – it is the only way to become sustainable and visible," said Sladjana. Ante from his side also made this point clear when he said that "no matter if you are an activist, or a researcher or a policy maker, no matter on which side you stand, you contribute somehow to the improvement of the lives of young people; the ideal situation is not an antagonistic one and all actors should be working together instead of on opposite sides".

Musical (white) chairs and mathematics

Just before the symposium's end, I finally managed to put them all four of them together (with the help of Marlies) on white chairs, hopefully not only for a photo opportunity. We had four people interviewed but only three chairs available – because a triangle has only three corners. If I asked the four of them to play musical chairs, they should all be able to win because a "golden triangle" only works when all its three corners are held together: research, policy and practice in youth work should be interconnected. So, don't be surprised if Jan and Zoran (who were both interviewed to bring in a perspective from youth work practice) are sharing the same chair – we had to apply the "pigeonhole principle" as it is called in mathematics.[3] We could still spend hours thinking where to place young people in this photo if we wanted to represent the geometry of the youth sector, but I think we can leave this question for a future mathematical problem-solving exercise.

3. In mathematics, the pigeonhole principle states that if n items are put into m pigeonholes with n > m, then at least one pigeonhole must contain more than one item. So, imagine that four pigeons need to be placed into three pigeonholes. Can it be done? The answer is yes but there is one catch. The catch is that no matter how the pigeons are placed, one of the pigeonholes must contain more than one pigeon. The idea is simple, isn't it ?