

Hanover Declaration on Youth Participation

Hanover/Germany, 7th - 10th of April 2005

Background:

More than 120 participants from 28 European countries met during the European Conference on Youth Participation "Please do disturb!". Young people involved in participation projects attended the conference as well as youth workers, scientists, local government officials and members of political bodies from across Europe. All participants of the attending nations agreed that youth participation is important and required for a progressive and democratic Europe, however this has to be supported and a framework be provided. The starting point for youth participation is very different in the various countries, but there are information, skills, opportunities and support structures existing on different levels in all the countries.

Regrettably, it has to be stated that the different European papers and documents on youth participation (e.g. the "White paper: A new impetus for European Youth", the "Council Resolution on common objectives for participation by and information for young people" etc.) were not yet able to guarantee an active increase of youth participation possibilities in the different countries, despite the good objectives of the respective authors and supporting entities.

The "Hanover Declaration on Youth Participation" tries to build a connection between the momentum of these documents and its political sphere of origin and the level of practical youth participation work on local or national level. It was this range of backgrounds and activities that formed the variety of participants in Hanover and what brought us to the position to address this declaration to political bodies in the European Union, hereby especially the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the national governments and the respective national ministries and institutions responsible for youth policy. Its recommendations also address youth workers, youth organisations and young people all across Europe in an attempt to draw some cohesion between understanding, action and direction.

In respect and appreciation of the recommendations set down in the "Council resolution of 25 November 2003 on common objectives for participation by and information for young people" (2003/C 295/04), we follow in principle the three objectives identified:

- I. Increase participation of young people in civic life in their community
- II. Increase participation of young people in the system of representative democracy
- III. Support for various forms of learning to participate

It is by following these objectives that our Declaration works towards some conclusions and recommendation on youth participation across Europe.

I. Increase participation of young people in civic life in their community

It is clearly evident that the starting point for youth participation is locally and based where young people are and live with their interests, issues and concerns. Participation and active citizenship needs to be based around opportunities to influence our practical environment, daily life and to be supported at this level by those in political responsibility. However, examples of the majority of the attending European countries showed that this aim is yet underdeveloped. Binding mechanisms are still lacking in most countries that assure the participation of young people or their representatives in issues and decisions that concerns them.

We therefore recommend the following aspects concerning the four key areas:

... information:

- That political bodies agree on the importance of youth participation
- That guidelines on positive participation for adults and young people will be established and be given binding relevance.
- That honesty, openness and transparency will be guiding principles in the dialogue between the actors.

... skills:

- That Youth workers, teachers and politicians would improve/develop the skills to listen, empower and be open to young people participating
- That training and coaching shall be provided and supported for young people especially on local as well as on regional and national level to build and further develop participation skills

... opportunities:

- That environments, structures and strategies are required to ensure that there are opportunities for exchange and dialogue
- That schools, voluntary and statutory youth organisations, NGO's and Youth centres should all have the resources and provision for youth participation

... support:

- That appropriate resources and investment are essential for the development of a sustainable youth participation infrastructure
- That trained and experienced staff/coaches/facilitators and animators are required wherever young people want and need them
- That specialists and youth participation workers would act as advisors and coaches to the decision makers.

For example:

"Netzwerkstatt" is a pilot project on participation. Young people establishing local networks of bodies active in youth participation together with politicians in five German cities. These Networks are coached by peers and (youth) experts.
www.projekt-nws.de

For example:

Despite all financial constraints and cuttings in other fields, the City of Amsterdam has increased the budget for youth work and participation projects up to 289.000 € in the year 2005.

II. Increase participation of young people in the system of representative democracy

In the European Union approximately 15% of the population are young people, being 75 millions of the overall population in the 25 member states. Being such important part of society, they could and should have a more visible influence on politics. It is well known that the polling percentages e.g. for the last elections on the European Parliament are down to approx. 30%, and that the number of youngsters in political parties is dwindling.

The conference participants state the following reasons for this situation: In general there is a low trust in the system by the young people, a pessimistic view on their real opportunities to influence political decisions within this system and a low self-confidence of the young people that they have the skills, language and competence to act in the field of representative democracy.

Young people are not consulted in most countries from the beginning; Tokenism is an often experienced answer on attempts of young people to gain an influence on political decision making processes.

There is as well a lack of transparency and central decisions in the NGO field; volunteer and youth organisations have to take care of democratic structures and bottom-up approaches need to be adopted.

The conference attendants therefore recommend the following possible solutions:

- To increase and improve youth information
- To improve the education in the formal sector on political topics and democracy
- To institutionalise (where not yet established) a frame-work of the youth policy in terms of youth laws, pacts, forums, consulting system etc.
- To establish a culture of openness at the political level by:
 - o opening political parties to young people
 - o raising awareness of politicians about the importance and benefits of youth participation
 - o consulting young people about their views
- To increase attractiveness of the political decision making process

In practical, this means to:

- Establish campaigns about elections adjusted to the different age groups
- Offer trial elections at schools and through other organisations
- Make the existing legislation accessible
- Institutionalise a system of youth consultation (e.g. youth advisory boards, parliamentary committee on youth, co-management bodies etc.)
- Encourage selection guidelines in the youth councils (geographical, gender, age etc. diversity)
- The development of education programmes on diplomacy, lobbying, active citizenship
- Establish participation networking among NGOs

For example:

In the County of Norfolk, the "Hear by Right" for youth participation was adopted. Standardised research methods were used to collect the voice of young people and to "build in" their consulting in all stages of the political process. An example would be that young people have been able to get the Council to consider concessionary fares for young people aged 16 to 19 rather than pay full fare on buses.

III. Support for various forms of learning to participate

In order to ensure the participation of young people a learning process that is accessible, inclusive of all and meaningful has to be developed. The learning process of participation aims to develop competences, attitudes, skills and knowledge.

Young people learning to participate can have a variety of venues: the family, school and the formal educational system, the vocational and job sector, peers, youth organisations and projects - and may also include many other informal opportunities.

From the actions of the European Youth Program and the pilot projects for participation supported by the European Commission, a dynamic has been initiated and new initiatives been developed at the local level in the field of non-formal and informal education to promote the active participation of young people. The differences lead to a lack of cohesion, understanding and sustainability.

School is considered as the most ideal place where participation should be learned and experienced and this should start at an early age. Many schools though do not work with principles of youth participation.

All points in the "Common Objectives..." (2003) remain important issues, especially "to further develop interaction between formal, non-formal and informal education; to promote and increase awareness of the benefits to all of the participation of committed young people and to combat prejudices against young people which prevent them from playing an effective part."

In order to address these objectives, the conference participants recommend that...:

- best practices in this field have to be promoted and developed further
- Information on youth participation opportunities is essential and therefore should be improved
- Schools should open up for a more than representative youth participation as it works in most countries; it should start with the interests and motivation of young people
- the learning process is better achieved through the involvement of the young people and this can be done through: human rights education, coaching, training and experiential learning with their peers and adults
- co-operation initiated between different partners, especially between formal and non-formal structures has to be intensified.

For example:

"Let's play to be an association!" is the title of a formal education programme established in the village of Paterna, close to Valencia. Young people realize small projects based on financial and organisational support by a specialized youth participation teacher.

To achieve these goals, political support is not sufficient and financial commitments and resources have to be provided.

Furthermore...

We have agreed during this conference that participation is not a self-evident value. If participation is a fake; if it is a mere representation without a realistic impact on issues that matter for young people, it makes no sense. Even more, simulations of youth participation have a dangerous impact on what is as a result known as political apathy and a decrease of trust in democratic institutions and processes among young people.

We consider participation not a self functioning automatic instrument. It requests the effort both of the political sphere, the sphere of youth work and the young people itself. To enable active and effective participation, politicians and local authorities are asked to implement "open structures of coordination", which provide relevant impact for young people on issues of their concerns. In order to have youth work being a reliable partner for the political approach, the main players (youth organisations, youth councils, youth participation structures, projects...) have to give up their competitive attitude of speaking exclusively for "the youth". Of course this is based by the fight for limited financial resources and influence on youth policy. The conference participants see the responsibility of these players to understand that none of them can alone cover the variety of youth interest and activities. On the side of young people we plea for the courage for them to speak up in their own language, for not simply copying the given structures and for the acceptance that their own view on the world is not the only one that exists.

The conference participants see the importance to gain awareness and consciousness of certain obstacles and traps of participation, taking advantage of research on youth participation and the evaluation of participation projects and innovative approaches.

Theoretical base, practical findings and methods, political instruments - all can be found on the many different levels from European Commission down to local youth policy. It is not the task to invent new wheels; it's time to make them roll - and fuel the vehicle!

If you are interested in further information, please contact the organisers of the European Conference on Youth Participation:

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Download and additional information on the declaration and the conference:
www.pdd.youthinaction.de