

**Youth Event "Equal Opportunity and Social Participation
for all Children and Youth", Cologne, 13-16 April 2007**

Conclusions of the Working Groups and Action Plan

Preamble

The issue of "social and professional integration of young people" will determine the youth policy agenda of the European Union until midyear 2008. Germany, Portugal and Slovenia have agreed to jointly place emphasis on this topic during the 18 months of their team presidency, whilst at the same time complying with one of the targets of the European Youth Pact.

Under this common motto, the German EU Presidency is particularly pointing out the subject of "Equal Opportunity and Social Participation for all Children and Youth" as theme for the Presidency Youth Event. A total of 160 young people from the EU member states, the EFTA states, Turkey, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were invited to discuss this policy plan and to actively participate in giving them shape.

We, the delegates, acknowledge that there are barriers to equal opportunity and social participation that are both political and institutional. We urge representatives from these areas to use this action plan which will strengthen equal opportunity and social participation for all children and young people.

In seven work groups we, the young people, debated along the objectives the open method of coordination and the European Pact for Youth are dealing with. The following Action Plan draws together the political priorities in the action areas of European youth policy and the demands we have towards decision-makers to reach equal opportunities and social participation for all children and youth. Furthermore it serves as a catalogue of activities we will self-commit our activities in the priority areas of European youth policy to reach this aim.

We welcome the opportunity presented to us at events such as this to debate and discuss and we applaud the development of the structured dialogue. We feel that this level of involvement of youth organisations throughout Europe is a step in the right direction.

To us, prerequisites of social participation are sound social security and knowledge of the opportunities available that will enable young people to be actively and continuously involved in decision-making processes, allowing young people to see the results of their participation through accountable processes.

Unfortunately, at this event we did not feel we were able to set the agenda; purpose and follow-up was not communicated properly; and information was not available in an accessible format. We felt we had no guarantee that our proposals would be considered in a formal and institutionalised process and we feel there is no method to report the consequences of participation to the young people involved. Therefore we do not feel this event was truly participatory. Moreover we experienced a lack of time, which minimized room for proper discussions.

Consequently, our first and primary proposal, upon which all of the action points depend, is that in future we are given a guarantee that this document, and all further documents produced at similar youth conferences, will be sent for consideration by the relevant institutions through a formal process, and that we will receive a report on the outcomes of consideration. This will enable to us to develop continuity and consistency of approach, allowing us to build on the developments since previous youth conferences.

Without knowing our past we cannot plan for our future, and information must be provided in an accessible format. We must be able to negotiate the agenda of the structured dialogue. In this way we can be sure that our action plan is meaningful and that we have truly participated in the development of youth policy.

Social participation can be made reality by empowering all young people. Empowerment of all young people, including young people with fewer opportunities, is necessary to make social participation possible.

1. Youth participation through better youth information

Provision – getting the message out – getting the right message. We believe that in order to target marginalised groups and individuals who do not participate we need know their needs. To do this we need to be able to do target group analysis, for small youth based organisations this is very difficult (small, few resources, funds and staff).

Therefore we need to

- have funds available to youth organisations to conduct market research;
- have a means of sharing market research tools that are appropriate for youth groups;
- have connections made between the application process and the publications fund on EU level.

Quality of Information. High quality information needs to be tailored and provided in an accessible form. Young people are subject to a massive flow of information in a variety of media and we must be careful in a high-tech media age that we do not underestimate the value of traditional media. Young people benefit from accessing information on a face to face basis and value personal experience as a mode of delivery. Having a person to ask questions enables critical assessment of information.

Therefore we need to

- continue and expand the 'Living Libraries' project;
- use this methodology in provision of information for young people more widely, using mobile human information points, for example road-shows;
- ensure that support is given by a person when information is provided (hand-holding in the initial stages of project design, application);
- commission research to understand what information young people receive, and what proportion of this is information that enables them to participate;
- ensure that information is up-to-date with centralised coordination mechanisms.

Structure. Young people must participate in the provision of information to young people and need to be integrated into processes through strategies such as national action plans.

Therefore to ensure real and effective youth participation we must

- ensure that there is a comprehensive distribution of information centres for young people;
- recognise that youth organisations, run by young people, are key actors and should be a central to information provision.

2. Drop-outs in the EU

The number of young people who leave school before completing secondary education in the EU goes as high as 15%. Like us, the EU recognizes this problem and set 2010 as target to decrease this number to 10%.

In order to ensure that young people have opportunity to live life of dignity, free of discrimination up to their fullest potential the EU, national governments and civil society must engage actively in fighting this phenomenon and creating measures to respond to it. Educational institutions are traditionally group-oriented and are not recognizing the different ways of learning of each individual.

As young people we demand:

- free and equal access to education;
- students to be guaranteed the right to study until they have acquired the skills necessary to participate in the labour market and society in general;
- student participation through school structures to guarantee influence of the students in school life and decision making in education;
- measures against school discrimination and bullying in order to ensure that school is a welcoming environment for everyone;
- teachers and school staff to be continuously trained to identify problems students might face and find adequate ways to act upon them. These trainings should also include updates of the teaching methods in respond to the continuously changing students.
- Non-formal education must be recognized as supplements to the formal educational system.

3. Fully employed?

Youth social inclusion has to be fully integrated into EU policy making and conceived as a collective responsibility throughout the whole EU.

First of all we encourage the European Union in the fight against discrimination in the labour market (based on age, gender, race or other factors) by improving already ongoing EU programmes, also with the cooperation of NGOs and at a grass-roots level. The main aim is to achieve a minimum level of social security and decent wages and at the same time to consider the young generation as a group that has useful and valuable capabilities to share.

Member states need to create a dual vocational education system based on cooperation between the private sector and the government. This means there is not only theoretical teaching but also practicing the obtained knowledge. This has to be fully integrated into the educational system in order to provide students with appropriate work experiences. The EU needs also to stimulate innovation and encourage non-formal learning inside youth organizations. A possible approach is to encourage cooperation between universities, youth organisations, enterprises and policy makers to ensure smooth transition between places of learning and the workplaces, also by guaranteeing equal access for youngsters to new media (such as the internet) or by empowering youth organisations to inform young people about vocational training for the less skilled.

There has to be higher spending on research and development from EU member states with binding EU targets in specific areas (such as a focus on micro loans with lower interest rates for young people, or promoting innovative youth entrepreneurship on a sustainable basis).

We request the third sector and local governments to recognize the importance of orientation (pre-vocational training and other internships) for young people to choose realistic and motivating job opportunities. This could be realized through empowering cooperation with the private sector (e.g. by investing in improvements of the information infrastructure). Young people have to be able

to reconcile the private and professional life (e.g. by improving public transport, child care services and other services of general interests in a local level).

4. Acquiring skills through volunteering and working in youth initiatives

1. Promote the existing structures of non-formal and informal educational organisations and opportunities so that people at all levels of society and the state recognize its value and its importance.

- Outreaching at a local level to marginalized communities with the aid of European and national governments so that disadvantaged young people in particular are targeted for participation.
- Information campaign to employers about existing international tools of recognizing non-formal education and to ensure mutual identification of individual competences and skills.

2. Using the formal education system to promote non-formal education opportunities and youth organisations, especially towards disadvantaged young people.

3. Young people need to participate in the formation of an international cross-sectoral system to recognize non-formal and in-formal education.

- Special events in the field of recognition, targeted at youth organisations.
- Dedicated approach to the development and usage of specific methodologies based on information sharing and communication; i.e. networking.

4. In order to improve the recognition of non formal learning and non-formal learned “content”, there is a need for cross-sectoral co-operation between the organisations providing non-formal learning, the stakeholders of formal education and employers. However, it should be made clear that certificates must not be the main motivation for youth work.

- System of evaluation for Europass – all existing instruments of the European Qualification Framework must be promoted.
- Life Long Learning programme (LLL) – there is a need for improved outreach programmes at the local level.

5. Improving accessibility to non-formal education through understandable information aimed at increasing the contact between lesser qualified people and the non-formal learning providers. The overall aim being to raise the qualification level of these people.

- Information campaign targeted at socially disadvantaged young people, informing them of opportunities to participate in non-formal learning programmes.
- European wide information networks should be made more visible at the local level
- Campaign targeted at socially disadvantaged young people which removes the barriers to their participation in informal and non-formal education

5. Think globally, act locally

Any youth participation worth its name contains an understanding that as young people are an important part of society they have a chance to influence all levels of public life and its development

as initiators, participators, decision-makers and leaders here and now. However, youth is not a homogeneous group and each individual has his or her certain needs, which must be understood and targeted. Participation must be a bottom-up process created by young people for young people and enabled by sufficient funding and support.

It is essential to promote structural dialogue between the local governments and youth representatives, which assumes the existence of trustworthy self-governing, decision-making structures. In those structures the budget, the allocations of funds and the operation methods should be controlled by the young citizens themselves. Such independence is built upon a trust that young people can act responsibly and be a part of the consultation-process when decisions concerning their situation are made. Thus, meetings and direct communicating in e.g. shadowing youth parliament, online forums and politics brunches are needed.

At the same time support for initiatives of non-affiliated individuals should be provided through simple access to relevant information. This could be done by creating e.g. data bases in Internet as well as local information centres where programmes' description, step-by-step project management knowledge and access to experienced people: peers, teacher, youth workers and politicians can be reached. Difficulties of affordability and mobility could be solved by organising projects at schools and at youth clubs.

In response to disintegration within society due to unequal rights and opportunities of its individuals, the identification of excluded groups and the reasons for this should be made.

Through mapping the difficulties of excluded people proper actions can be taken to create an open and including society. By intercultural trainings and exchanges the self-awareness can be raised and tolerance promoted. Local community aware projects should be organised and specifically advertised to reach the target groups. Furthermore, peer learning where young people tutor other youngsters is another way to foster integration.

In all of the above motivation is a key element to further engagement and actual participation. Empowerment stems from gaining resources, autonomy, rewards and personal satisfaction from making a real input into society along with recognition of one's actions. Finally, participation has to be an ongoing process not just an event and it has to be constantly evaluated to show what has actually been achieved and what is left to be done.

6. Volunteer services promote the active citizenship of young people

Firstly, we ask for all countries to provide funding in the form of technical support. Therefore a platform for exchanging of requests and offers of volunteering opportunities on a national and European level should be developed to increase opportunities for participation. Volunteers and volunteering organisations have to play an important role in establishing this platform.

Secondly, volunteering and active citizenship has to be promoted in order to be recognised by society. Therefore, we want the year of 2012 to be the European year of volunteering. Institutions and companies have to be encouraged to let young people engage in voluntary activities and services. Thus, campaigns in all EU communities promoting programmes and good examples that give time to volunteering have to be made public by European Commission and governments.

We demand better accessibility to information facilities. Help in the application procedure for youth grants also has to be increased. Better cooperation between different sectors has to be adopted. Youth information centres in all communities in the EU have to be established. Youth information centres have to be staffed with experienced volunteers.

It is important for young people to be able to evaluate their own projects. Therefore the European Commission has to support the organisation of as many training programmes in all communities in the EU as possible.

7. Together we can get things moving

Young people are affected by all policy areas. This is why youth issues have to be mainstreamed into all policy areas. We see the European Youth Pact as an opportunity to promote youth mainstreaming.

Empowerment and inclusion of all young people, including those with fewer opportunities, needs cross-cutting approaches. Cross-cutting approaches minimize barriers between policy fields and improve the coordination between all actors, especially political institutions. Instead of institution oriented measures we need approaches tailored for the individual young person, taking account her or his individual potentials.

Our aim is the **empowerment** of all young people. This is why we demand:

- the voting age to be lowered to 16 years at all political levels in order to make decision-makers from all policy fields and levels more accountable to young people.
- that every young person can participate in the “added value” of Europe. Every young person has to get the opportunity to take part in the everyday life in another European country for at least two weeks – no matter what somebody’s financial or academic background is or if he or she is handicapped. Cross-cutting approaches between the youth & the education sector are needed to make this reality.

Actions:

- Build on existing initiatives of youth organizations; school exchange programmes and town-twinning programmes.
- On EU level: Extend the funding of existing programmes and simplify the access to existing programmes such as self-organized youth exchanges (Youth programme) and “Junior Erasmus” (Socrates) considerably!

Access for all to information and to capacities is a pre-condition for empowerment. This is why we demand:

- political responsibilities to be made clear so political decision makers are more accountable.
- to make visible what young people can do to improve their everyday life.
- Action: if representatives of youth organizations go into schools, school students can learn from other young people.
- the capacities of youth organizations to be strengthened, so youth organizations can contribute to a wider range of policies by broadening their networks and engaging with different authorities at different levels.

Better **coordination** between all actors at all levels and policy fields makes policies and youth participation processes more successful and effective. This is why we demand:

- Cross-sectoral involvement of young people on all levels, from the local to the European level.
- Young people to set their own political agenda on all political levels, discuss it with the decision makers and ask them modify their political agenda according to the young agenda.
- Actions: we want to structure the structured dialogue!
- Co-management. Close and continuous cooperation between youth, policy makers and other stakeholders is needed. Decisions affecting young people have to be made by policy makers and young people on an equal footing.
- A youth ombudsman. Young people need to have somebody whom they can address easily and who redirects their concerns to the responsible authorities.

Conclusions

Many steps need to be taken towards the aim of equal opportunities and social participation for all children and youth. We, the young people, want to make changes happen and we want to see the changes happening:

We demand an ongoing follow-up of our Action Plan

- Officials as well as young experts from youth councils write structured reports, including best practices, on the implementation of our Action Plan on all levels;
- At youth meetings at the end of 2007 and in 2008 (e. g. at the Portuguese and the Slovenian youth event) an evaluation of the implementation of the Action Plan (so far) takes place.