

## Report from the outside: How is Norway dealing with Youth Information and Participation

As member of European Union Affairs Commission (EUACOM) of The European Youth Forum (YFJ) and president of The Norwegian Youth Council (LNU) I want to contribute to the evaluation of the Open Method of Coordination carried out by the member states of The European Union (EU).

Since Norway's request to be part of the OMC was denied by the EU, OMC is not a topic within the youth structures in Norway. However, The Norwegian Youth Council has nominated the undersigned into the structures of YFJ to follow the process and bring best practice back to Norway. The main aim of *this* report is however to bring some experience from Norway back to YFJ, and hopefully also add some ideas to further demands when it comes to implementation of the Common Objectives Information and Participation. Therefore this report will focus far lot more on what IS achieved than what is lacking and not achieved. However there are still a lot of challenges to ensure children and youth with targeted information and fulfill their rights to participate in Norway.

### Contact with Governmental structures, an evidence of mainstreaming?

The Norwegian Youth Council (LNU) is an umbrella organization for 71 children and youth organizations. The Ministries working most on children and youth issues are The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, The Ministry of Social and Health Affairs, The Ministry of Culture, The Ministry of Knowledge and The Ministry of Children and Equality. The Ministry of Children and Equality is the coordinating Ministry on Children and Youth Affairs, while the Ministry of Culture is the coordinating Ministry when it comes to state policy towards NGOs.

There are several contact points between LNU, the member organisations and some of the ministries. Every year LNU hosts a meeting between the member organizations and the different ministers (Ministers of Culture, Knowledge, Foreign Affairs, Development Assistance, Local Governments and Regional Development and Health). The ministers are invited one at a time, and we meet them in the office of LNU with one of the board members of LNU chairing the meeting.

The Ministry of Children and Equality invites all the organizations for an annual Contact Conference. Half a year before this concerence LNU is invited to give input on the agenda. LNU and some of the member organizations (dependent on the topics) are also invited to the annual Contact Conference for the responsible for children and youth in the municipalities. There are also two contact lunches a year for the staff of LNU and the staff in the Ministry working

on Children and Youth Affairs. Often representatives of LNU are chairing processes in both these conferences.

### **1. Common objective 1: Information**

**Statement:** Norway has improved on communicating with youth during the last years, but there are great challenges, especially when it comes to communicating public information to ethnic minorities.

#### **General Youth Information: Ung.no**

In Norwegian "young" is "ung". The web site ung.no was put up by the Directorate of Children and Youth two years ago to provide young people with useful information. The site has several quality standards, amongst them a demand for the information to come from non-commercial actors like governmental structures and NGOs.

The site provides information on everything from education, pregnancy and children's rights till how to get a driving license, how to influence your municipality or the government and on the work of different children and youth NGOs. The web site content is strictly targeted at youth, and close to 60 000 users (The population of Norway is approximately 4,5 million) visit the web site on a monthly basis. Ung.no is unfortunately only available in Norwegian.

#### **Youth Information Centers**

17 municipalities in Norway have initiated youth information centers, put up by the government and run with young employees in cooperation with children and youth structures as local and regional youth councils. Young people can drop by with questions about everything from cultural activities, their rights as students, information on different schools, inspiration for holidays or help to write an application for a job. A Youth Information Center has been put up in Karasjok to provide information in sapmi, the language of Norway's indigenous people.

#### **Information on the rights of children and youth**

Norway ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child January 8 1991, and since then the rights of children and youth has been an important issue for the Government as well as LNU. The Ministry provides the convention itself in all the languages anyone asks for it. There is also information targeted at municipalities, kindergarten staff, teachers, leaders in youth organizations and everyone else involved in work with youth.

#### **Clear message in**

A new Government's web site is currently under construction and will get an interactive structure to ensure that everyone can access the decision makers.

## 2. Common objective 2: Participation

**Statement:** Youth participation in Norway is in general a lot better taken care of on the international level than on the national level.

### **Global level**

LNU is seen as the natural recruiter of youth representatives to the UN General Assembly (our highest ranked representation since 1971), and other UN Bodies as UNESCO and UN-Habitat. Children and youth representatives appointed by LNU are also given status as advisors in delegations to UN Conferences as The UNGA Special Session of Children and the UN Commission on the Status of Women. In the UNGA the Youth Delegates are the only non-governmental representatives in the 90 people large delegation with the right to speak on behalf of the Norwegian government. LNU is now working on providing the youth delegates to the UNGA with the right to negotiate on behalf of Norway on youth related issues.

By demand from LNU the Ministry of Foreign Affairs covered the expenses for youth delegates from Norway's main cooperation countries to the UN-Habitat World Urban Forum in 2004 and Governing Council in 2005. As it to LNU is important that youth cooperation is equal and mutual, LNU in cooperation with the local Youth Information Center in Oslo got the former Minister of Local Governments and Regional Development to take part in café dialogue discussions with the different youth representatives on World Urban Forum 2006. This way we provided the governments present with methods for working with children and youth in local, regional and national planning processes.

The Norwegian youth delegates were also trusted as negotiators on the UN-Habitat Youth Strategy, which was adopted at UN-Habitat Governing Council 2005. For 2006 LNU is demanding that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs covers the expenses for the UN General Assembly.

LNU is permanently represented in the national UNESCO Commission and also in the delegations to UNESCO's General Conference.

LNU has so far not been able to convince the Government that youth expertise is needed in the delegation for World Trade Organization meetings, but during the last negotiations LNU covered the expenses of two member organizations sending representatives to Hong Kong. During the negotiations the youth NGO representatives gave the Norwegian delegates lessons in children's and youth's rights and the relations to and consequences of the negotiations.

### **European level**

The Ministry of Children and Equality always invite LNU to send an observer to the European Steering Committee for Youth within the Council of Europe. The Ministry is also actively supporting the Co-management structure working on youth within the Council of Europe.

The Ministry of Local Governments and Regional Development invited LNU as one of two representatives from Norway till the launching of the Council of Europe Democracy Forum. Norway was the one country to bring a youth representative, even though all member states were encouraged to invite representatives from civil society.

### **Nordic level**

At the moment two structures are put up to ensure youth participation during the Norwegian presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. A working group is providing the Ministers responsible for gender equality with a white paper on equality issues, while a youth panel is put up to evaluate the Nordic welfare states and give recommendations for development of these. In both these structures youth are given the initiative in developing new policy, rather than the usual hearing institution where youth structures are invited to react to already developed policy papers from the Government.

The Nordic Youth Committee is put up by the co-management principle, and the LNU representative and the governmental representative have one vote each. The influence is more linked to money than to political decisions.

### **National level**

The Minister of Children and Equality opens the General Assembly of LNU every year (she has just cancelled a meeting in Switzerland to keep this tradition alive also in 2006). The LNU GA is named "Barne- og ungdomstinget" (The Norwegian Parliament is named "Stortinget"), and the minister's presentation of the Government's policy regarding children and youth is followed by a debate with the children and youth organizations.

In 2003 the former Minister of Children and Family Affairs invited LNU to put up a concept for a co-management structure, and she promised that the Government would be ready to consider it. The same invitation has been repeated from the Government, the member organizations of LNU have however not seen the need for such a structure so far.

**Hearings - written and committee hearings:** The hearing institution is strong in Norway. When a new law is adopted, the proposals are sent on hearing, often both from the responsible ministry and from the parliament. Written response is then expected and taken into account by the decision makers-often also attached and used in the background documents for the new law.

LNU and member organizations are also often invited to hearings in the Parliament to present our view on the proposals.

When there are proposals so controversial that the member organizations of LNU can not agree or allow LNU to represent their view, LNU is sometimes asked to invite organizations with different views to meet the parliamentarians or the ministry.

LNU can also choose what committee hearings we want to participate in during the parliamentary work on the national budget.

The formal hearings in the Parliament are however more a “marketing” of the competence of the youth organizations and more symbolic than all the informal work and cooperation carried out in between the meetings. Children and youth organizations are by more and more decision makers seen as representatives of the one group of citizens without the right to vote and therefore important contributors to the Norwegian democracy. Therefore access to the Parliament and Government is within reach of the organizations with competence on different policy areas.

**Committees:** New policy areas in Norway are often approached by the Government appointing a committee to deliver white papers. These days the youngest committee of this kind ever is working (average age of 34). LNU has two (out of eight) representatives in the committee, which shall evaluate the state support policy for children and youth organizations and come up with ideas on how to improve the funding systems and the rest of the policy area. One member organization is represented in the committee and there are also other representatives with strong relations to LNU. LNU sees this as an acknowledgement of the knowledge gained in children and youth organizations. However 21 % of the population in Norway is below the age of 30, and only 3 % of the representatives in committees appointed by the government is below 30.

**Election projects:** The election rate for the Parliament elections in Norway are decreasing. To raise interest in the formal participation structures and raise the election rates, the youth organizations were challenged to form campaigns to make more young people vote. Several of LNU’s member organizations and LNU had election projects during 2005 before the elections in September. The projects were sponsored by The Ministry of Local Governments and Regional Development. LNU used the opportunity to make the member organizations challenge young politicians and spread the challenges, the methods, the answers and campaign material amongst the member organizations.

**The Parliament and youth:** The Parliament has own web sites targeted at youth ([tinget.no](http://tinget.no)), where young people find information about processes related to youth and also advice on how to lobby the parliamentarians. The lobby part is in general produced by LNU with contributions from the undersigned. The

Parliament also invites to a "Summer Camp" in the Parliament every Summer where young people from all over Norway get training in lobby work and introductions to politics.

After the 2005 elections, 17 out of 169 parliamentarians are below the age of 30.

**Really bad example: Youth Panel put up by the Ombudsman for Children:** In 2005 the Norwegian Ombudsman for Children realized he had little competence on youth issues and decided to put up a Youth Panel. However the participants were recruited from the area of Oslo only, and the Ombudsman tried to avoid the organized youth. This undermines the role of young people's organizations and also excludes a lot of knowledge. Both LNU and the new Minister of Local Governments and Regional Development have sent critical letters and pressured the Ombudsman in the media, and he is now trying to recruit broader geographically and also inviting organized youth into the panel.

**The national campaign committee for "All different - all equal":** The national campaign committee for "All different - all equal" has representatives from both governmental bodies and youth organizations. The committee is chaired by LNU's representative.

**The Nobel Peace Prize Committee:** LNU has so far not been able to convince the Parliament President that a youth representative is needed in the Nobel Peace Prize Committee.

### **Local and regional youth participation structures**

- **Nothing about us without us? Yeah, right..:** More and more municipalities in Norway are putting up children and youth structures to ensure children and youth participation. The slogan "Nothing about us without us" has become popular within the ministries and the local governments. However 1/3 of the civil servants responsible for children and youth in the municipalities (all municipalities in Norway have to appoint a civil servant with the responsibility of ensuring children's and youth's rights in local planning processes) have reported that the children and youth councils never really influenced the policy making in the municipality. This is results from a survey undertaken 6 years ago, and there is a need for more research on youth participation in Norway. LNU's attitude to the local and regional children and youth structures is that involving children and youth without empowering them is a waste of resources and abuse of young people.

**Democracy projects in kindergartens and schools:** Several kindergartens are now working on implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the everyday work. Schools have for a long time had democratic structures for their students, but only lately the students' councils have been empowered

and are able to work on the issues that really mean something to the school students. Both these fields have to be subject for more research.

## Results and conclusions

**The Convention on the Rights of the Child:** Norway never became part of OMC. However something else happened in 2003: Norway implemented the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into national law. This strengthened the rights of children and youth and put it even higher on the agenda in Norway. LNU and other organizations use the Convention as a strong lobby tool. This has further strengthened the focus on the rights of children and youth.

**Distance paradox:** The paradox is however that the work is better the further away from the grass root level we go. Norway is by my opinion far better at including and involving children and youth in the work towards the UN institutions than the work in most municipalities in Norway. This has to be dealt with from now on. Children and youth are experts on being youth.

**Trust:** If young people are not trusted on the local level, they do not realize that they have the capacity to change the world. They will get this trust in youth organizations but so far they do not meet this absolutely necessary trust in many of the local and regional children and youth councils.

Hopefully the campaign "All different - all equal" will address these challenges in 2006 and 2007.

Should you have any questions to the content of this report, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards

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