

## **Shadow Report: Information and Participation – Implementation of common objectives**

Youth Council of Slovakia has issued the Shadow Report on implementation of common objectives on information and participation. The main impetus was a guideline from Youth Forum Jeunesse (YFJ) as recommendation to national youth councils to develop its shadow reports independent from official national reports on participation and information.

The Shadow Report is structured to three thematic circles:

- a) The Implementation Process
- b) Information
- c) Participation

### **1. The Implementation Process**

#### **Contact with government**

The Youth Council of Slovakia (RMS) is an umbrella organization associating children and youth organizations. The state competence for „Youth“ field is mainly in hands of Ministry of education of the Slovak republic. In 2001 Ministry of education has recognized RMS as its official partner for area of youth policy. In that way RMS has become a subject which should be counted at making, realization and implementation of decisions coming from public sector.

The year of 2001 also means a big change for youth policy in Slovakia. The Concept of State Policy related to children and youth has expressed that change exactly. The Concept has been based on principles of White Paper of European Commission – New Impetus for European Youth. RMS has fundamentally participated on making and commenting of the document and many of our comments and views were accepted and adopted.

In 2005 new conditions of Ministry of education on recognition of national youth council status were adopted. In accordance to them the umbrella organization has to apply for the status every three years. RMS achieved this status for period of 2006-2008. Besides defining of the criteria of recognition, Ministry of education does not set any right and duties arising from the status of national youth council. This is the main reason why status of national youth council is defined by its own practice.

We perceive the consultation process as one of possibilities for joining public matters and decision-making. During last years the youth policy issues were narrowed to area of Ministry of education only. Other ministries (such as employment and social affairs, environment, regional development) deal with youth issues to smaller extent. Therefore the consultation process as a part of open method of coordination was realized mainly in relation to Ministry of education.

The consultation process is realized through **comments and discussions to documents** of different type. Giving of concrete formulated initiatives and drafts to proper document is the main aim of this type of consultation. RMS is often invited to this type of consultation especially to documents with non-legal and non-binding character.

Regularly, RMS is invited to giving comments to Action plan of Concept of State policy toward children and youth. The Action plan is a document with supra-department character prepared by Ministry of education and it is actualized annually. The other important document is also the Draft Implementation of European Youth Pact in Slovak Republic.

Other usual type of consultation is realization of **working sessions with deputies of government, local and regional authorities and non-governmental sector**. The main aim of working sessions is to create space for collecting of ideas, knowledge, experience and good practices or to avoid negative phenomena. Results of the sessions are mostly useful for formulating of concrete ideas and documents. RMS is still giving a chance, recommending and encouraging its member organizations to take an active part in this kind of sessions.

Next type of consultation is realization of **small working sessions** between deputies of RMS (mostly staff members or members of the board) and deputies of Ministry of education. There are many of them during the year and they are realized through personal contact, telephonic or internet communication.

Other type is **direct participation** on decision-making, which is mentioned below.

Diversity of types of consultation with governmental institutions should be main precondition for increasing of the consultation process. As for relation to Ministry of education, RMS see moderate improving comparing to the past times (before 2000). Ministry invites RMS to consultations through Department of children and youth. It is often done by official invitations, letters and formal notices. As for relation to other ministries, we can speak about long-term stagnation caused by lack of information on youth policy and youth policy issues, its documents. Governmental ministries and institutions see public matters only through their view of competence and do not want to see them as cross-sectoral.

The question of the first contact is mostly in hands of state. Although RMS has initiated some of consultation meetings and has given statements to some of youth policy issues, there are still possibilities to improve active attitude to the consultation process. In the future RMS wants to do that especially toward Ministry of education as a crucial ministry for youth policy now, and toward Ministry of employment, social affairs and family.

As for information and information-consulting activities for young people, government has not adopted any concept or such document. Currently the Slovak Republic realizes project „Infovek“ focused on informatization and providing internet in elementary and secondary schools. Also Action plan for project „Minerva“ counts with informatization of the whole society. But the strategy for spreading of information aimed on specific topics related to young people is still falling behind. So providing and spreading of information is realized by non-governmental organizations and government (ministry of education) is only in role of supporter. But there is no advanced governmental network of centres for information and consulting and also there is not any governmental information portal.

## **2. Information**

According to European Charter on information for young people, information and consulting services are provided by some institutions in Slovakia. Despite of lack governmental network, Ministry of education has the competence and it is realized by its organization Iuventa and Institute of information and prognosis which is also engaged in youth research.

The main non-governmental actor is Association of Youth Information and Consulting Centers (ZIPCEM) as a member of ERYICA - European Youth Information and Counselling Agency. ZIPCEM associates 19 youth information centers. Its goal is to provide information and consultation services in specific areas for young people according to European Charter. Year to year there is slight increasing number of the centers and also their quality is improved. ZIPCEM uses different ways of providing information: directly, by a phone hot line and by internet database.

Information centers are situated mainly in some bigger towns and cities. We consider it as a lack because information should be spread and provided to all young people. Many young people find alternative sources of knowledge in schools or in the street.

RMS is also active in the field of information. RMS uses for this purpose its own publishing tools: internet portal and ZOOM-M magazine for youth and workers with youth.

Information and consulting activities are covered by financial sources from Ministry of education as the only support program for information and consultation in Slovakia. Every year the sum of about 50.000 Euro is divided among ZIPCEM and youth information and consultation centers for their running costs and projects.

It is very low support from regional and local authorities. There is no systematic support, but only occasional and one-time used. The main initiative is in hands of youth information centers still having to fight for their support. It is very sad that local and regional authorities do not accept and do not want to understand the value of information for young people.

Other kind of financial support for spreading information is expressed in national youth council subsidies. The subsidies are used for running of internet portal [www.mladez.sk](http://www.mladez.sk) containing information from direct work with youth, offers and opportunities for young people to participate in domestic or foreign activities, support of mobility, European and world cooperation, database of contacts of youth organizations, database of leisure time activities. The information is free for spreading and accessible to young people. Actually RMS is preparing new design of the web-page to provide separately information service and institutional service.

Eurodesk is the other portal which should be also very important in the field of youth information. RMS has expressed its distress that despite great support Eurodesk does not fulfill its main goals on functioning and access to information for young people. During recent time the functions of Eurodesk has slightly improved but on the other side information provided by the portal are still like copies from European youth portal. Therefore RMS has stressed that government and responsible institutions have to secure efficiency of Eurodesk.

As mentioned above, the internet portal [www.infovek.sk](http://www.infovek.sk) is also interesting tool for support of providing information to young people. The project „Infovek“ is aimed on internetization of schools. Besides of formal learning by electronic means which is quite

innovative, the portal contains information services about domestic and international projects realized by schools. The portal also gives an opportunity for self-realization in different activities such as publishing of e-magazines.

Contemporary society is rightly called „information society“. Globalization and its factors show increased need to educate children and young people how to carefully work with information because the influence from media and internet to young people is very intensive. In spite of importance of mentioned facts, the government has not issued a specific conceptual document on information. The support for information is still declared in Action plans and in the Concept of state policy toward youth. The information area needs to be extra attended. This purpose should be done by effective and concrete governmental information concept for youth.

### **3. Participation**

#### **The process of implementation**

Among the basic goals of the Youth Council of Slovakia's strategic plan is the support of youth participation in Slovakia. But RMS does not have the interest to do this artificially and for any price. RMS fulfills this goal in praxis in two particular ways:

- a) By direct representation in consultation, decision-making and coordination bodies;
- b) By active engagement in negotiations with the possibility to present its viewpoint and discussion.

Ad 1: RMS use this possibility e.g. in governmental advisory bodies (Governmental Council for children and youth, Governmental Council for NGOs) and within Ministry of Education (Resort coordination group, Evaluation commissions for financial support)

Ad 2: This possibility is used frequently mainly towards the Ministry of Education. The discussions are followed out in form of round tables or in form of bilateral negotiations. In relation to other resorts and institutions there is the possibility of participation used only in single cases. We can although mention Committee of National Council for education, science, youth and sport, Ministry of labor, social issues and family, diverse working committees and advisory boards, whose specialization is aimed at youth policy.

The council focuses on a bottom up approach to participation by enabling representatives from its member organizations and other children and youth organizations to take part in discussions on all levels. Supporting to them is RMS staff working, whose work aim is oriented to this problem. Until nowadays RMS didn't develop the strategy of involvement of non-organized youth into the process of consultation on national level.

On the regional level, RMS initiated founding of the Regional Youth Councils as reaction to the process of decentralization and public administration reform. These councils serve as umbrella organizations for children and youth organizations on the regional level (There are 8 administrative regions in Slovakia, which were not created naturally).

Moreover, they insure the function of partners of Regional Councils and regional authorities in the field of youth policy. Currently, there are eight Regional Youth Councils in Slovakia, which are legally independent from RMS. They are members of RMS and from that they have all rights and obligations following from the membership.

The situation in the single regions is different. In some of the regions is the cooperation between regional youth council and regional authority very well, others has to face the unwillingness of recognition, or have their own problems with its existence and actual work contents. To illustrate a positive example, regional councils in Žilina and Trnava Self-Governing Regions have established a successful cooperation with regional authorities. Žilina Self-Governing Region adopted a draft proposal of the Conception of Policy towards Youth on the regional level which also includes regulations of children and youth NGOs financial support via grant schemes. A similar document has been adopted by the Trnava Self-Governing Region authorities. As a positive example can be considered, experience from Bratislava region, where the regional youth council has successfully organized regular meetings with deputies and clerical workers at local and regional self-governing and with representatives of the capital city.

In spite of the positive experience from the regions we have to make a statement that the organisation of similar activities and the initiative by itself are in hand of few individuals – volunteers and enthusiast. Involvement of non-organized youth is a sporadic phenomenon as well. Systematic support and conception from the state is missing. It is written nowadays only in form of non-obligatory declarations formulated in annual action plans of the Ministry of Education.

The effort to influence the public issues in youth field, regional youth councils should show more interest to be involved in participative structures, mainly in advisory bodies of the regional self-government (commissions focused on youth issues). It is wished, that youth will be a part of decision making processes as in the meaning of the European charter on participation of young people in local and regional life. The fact, that this is all based in hand of few individuals makes a contra-productive impact.

However, one has to add that Regional Youth Councils must function in a situation where there is no single partner on the part of regional authorities. This situation stems from the fact that regional self-governments have functioned for only four years in Slovakia.

On the local level, the relationship between youth NGOs and local authorities is very diverse since there are app. 3.000 municipalities and towns in Slovakia. Nevertheless, one may state that towns offer young people more opportunities for self-realization and participation in the life of community than smaller municipalities. In this way the possibilities of development and support of the youth participation are growing.

RMS has the intension to support and activate local governments that they create conditions and supporting measures for young people and their participation into public issues. RMS makes an effort to be the partner of Association of cities and villages of Slovakia, which is the umbrella organisation of local self-governments. The partner relationship between RMS and the Ministry of Education is shown as a good example

and as a way of youth involvement into consultative and decision processes on local level.

Differences among local self-governments in Slovakia are also reflected in the available mechanisms of support for youth participation. Municipalities often put “youth issues” into the categories of education, culture or sport without a clear link between them. So there is the problem of resortism and missing transsectoral coordination. In this context, there are several examples of youth participation at the local level:

- **Youth Parliaments** that function either independently or at high schools and their members are usually between 13 and 18 years old. The main goal of these parliaments is to create a platform for discussion, statement of opinion and formulation of initiatives. However, the real power of Youth Parliaments often depends on their acceptance by local authorities. In this sense, independent youth parliaments or parliaments representing various schools have greater chances for formal acceptance. For instance, Youth Parliaments in Prievidza and Košice function as official partners of local self-governments (which are confirmed in a contract signed by the two sides).
- **Local Youth Councils** represent local NGOs and other organizations that work with children and youth. Although there are only few examples of such Councils, they managed to create a functional relationship with local authorities. The main aim of such Councils is to influence youth policy on the local level and serve as partners of local authorities in this field.
- **Representatives of Young People** whose role is to represent and defend the interest of young people in different advisory bodies and discussion forums on the local level, e.g. in committees of Local Assemblies, projects evaluation committees, grant commissions etc.

Similar to national level, there are no known strategies on local level for supporting participation of non-organized youth. The support in this area is reduced to co-organization of the activities for the non-organized youth, but without their actual participation.

In the field of youth participation are the self-governments des-orientated, despite of positive good examples which already exist in Slovakia. As we already mentioned above, the term “participation” and its true meaning in the practice is still rather new in Slovak society. That’s why it is important to spread the information, to provide trainings for workers from self-governments and to create a support mechanism from the state for diverse recommendation and guides (creation of manual). The state, similar as at regional level, reduces itself just to declarations, which point the directions but the final realization is not visible.

## **Tools**

At the state level, the RMS has a single partner – the Ministry of Education which proposes concrete measures and tools such as financial support and program support.

In the field of financial support the Ministry of education subsidizes on a quite high level the functioning of national youth council, regional youth councils, and youth and children civic associations (youth organisations). This kind of support can be seen as stable for functioning and working of mentioned organisations. During the last 3 years has the subsidy a rising trend. For instance, in 2005 the Ministry supported youth participation via its grant program "Participation of youth of 15-26 years of age" directed at youth NGOs and municipalities (13 projects received support). A similar financial support on the regional or local level is possible but not obligatory; it is not set by law, which means that it depends solely on the good will of regional and local authorities.

The state aims its programmes towards formulation of the objectives, mostly defined in diverse documents, action plans and conception. The Ministry of Education declares annually in the action plan tasks for remaining resorts in the youth field, recommendations for self-governments and for non-governmental organisations. RMS although has noticed that the ministry doesn't provide enough capacity and control tools to evaluate and to give sanctions for not fulfilling the tasks following from action plan. More than once happened that RMS declared the need of youth legislative (RMS did the analysis of the legislative environment and subsequently youth law), but up to now there was no law adopted and the waiting in the youth field starts to remind us on the famous "Waiting for Godot" play.

## **Results and conclusion**

From the year 2003 RMS noticed that many changes have been done and the orientation is set in a good way. Participation, which was relatively a new term 3 years ago, is talked about more often and it is a common thing that it is out in the context with regional and local level. RMS considers as a very positive the financial support in form of a new programme Participation. As positive could be considered also organization of discussion forums, conferences and round tables, where participation is often the discussed topic.

On the other side, only declared regulations are not enough for implementation of the measures towards support of the participation. In Slovakia, is the term of participation not a rooted term, especially among young people. The low level of organized youth and significant passivity and lack of interest for public issues give many appeals to RMS, regional councils and youth organisations work and create stimulus for the state and self-governments. Therefore RMS focuses its activities on spreading information about the importance of youth participation in public affairs and tries to decrease the passivity of young people and increase their interest in the life of their local communities. Since many young people do not even know their rights and duties in relation to local authorities, RMS published a kind of a handbook on participation written in youth-friendly language.