



Policy Paper on Democracy and Youth Organisations

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1. INTRODUCTION

Young people today have better and more equal opportunities to access information and gain knowledge about society.¹ However, the divide is growing in Europe between the democratic institutions, elected representatives, and political parties on the one hand, and the citizens on the other. The disenchantment with politics, the mistrust towards political parties and the complexity of democratic decision-making processes is creating a democratic deficit, which is particularly relevant for groups that are underrepresented as well as underprivileged and therefore less involved in decision-making processes. Policy makers, institutions and civil society are aware of the existing need to improve the participation of young people and especially youth organisations in democratic decision-making processes, but the value of youth organisations for sustaining and strengthening democracy is not yet fully recognised.

YFJ works to empower young people to actively participate in the society they are living in and to actively participate in democratic decision-making processes. It represents and advocates the needs and interests of young people and of their organisations at the European Institutions, the Council of Europe and the United Nations. The YFJ and its member organisations, being built upon democratic principles and values themselves, consider democracy and democratic participation crucial in every aspect of their work. Hence, all these principles and values are equally important in youth organisations as they are in the whole society as such. Therefore, the YFJ reaffirms its position concerning the need to place youth organisations in the centre of the spectrum of democratic life.

This paper aims at addressing the need to foster a culture of democratic participation, especially among young people. As an important part of fostering young people's democratic participation, the European Youth Forum calls for lowering the voting age to 16. It also addresses the need of citizenship education in the formal and non-formal education system as well as the broad contribution of youth organisations in this regard. Furthermore, the European Youth Forum puts forward recommendations and proposed actions towards the different stakeholders securing the sustainable democracy and youth participation in democratic decision-making processes.

2. DEMOCRACY – A GENERAL APPROACH

Youth organisations in Europe are facing a variety of democratic realities. Therefore, the YFJ aims at addressing the needs and challenges they have in common when participating in democratic decision-making processes.

Furthermore, the YFJ considers the respect and protection of civic, political, social, and economic rights and the respect of the rule of law as core element of society when talking about democracy in Europe today.

¹ Council of Europe Documentation - Seminar „New ways of participation based on Information and Communication Technologies“

Even if democracy is experienced differently in the European multilevel structures - from the local, regional, national to the European level - it still depends on the active participation of the individual. Appropriate, transparent and efficient communication and information structures are needed. Each young citizen has the right to be informed about and aware of decision-making processes that affect the society that he/she is living in, in order to be empowered and make responsible decisions. A democratic, sustainable and truly prosperous society requires that its citizens take the responsibility to care for the common good², which has to be considered as a learning process that starts at the local level, being the closest and most accessible form of participation in democracy.

While the European Youth Forum acknowledges the changes in participation trends and the fact that not all young people are members of youth organisations, it is firmly convinced that non-governmental - and especially youth - organisations provide a solid and democratic representation of the interests of young people. Through their wide-ranging networks and democratic decision-making procedures³ as a crucial addition to representative democracy, youth organisations are giving young people the possibility to experience democratic decision-making in practice. Further, the YFJ is convinced that youth organisations are the actors to reach out to more and more diverse young people, as they are the closest to young Europeans.

3. YOUTH ORGANISATIONS AND DEMOCRACY

3.1. Fostering a Culture of Democratic Participation

Participation is about having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to participate in as well as influence decisions, to engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society⁴. Participation lies within the core business of the European Youth Forum and the encouragement of young people as active citizens. The reinforcement of their active participation in democratic life is essential to its Member Organisations.

In particular, the European Youth Forum believes that a 'culture of democratic participation' needs to be created to increase and ensure the participation of young citizens in the agenda setting, implementation and evaluation of democratic decision-making processes from an early age.

In order to foster a culture of democratic participation young people need to be given the access as well as the encouragement to exercise the civil and political rights and duties recognised by democratic society. ⁵

² 0590-06 Meeting young people needs, A European Youth Forum approach to Youth Policy; Adopted by the General Assembly, November 2006

³ 0590-06 Meeting young people needs, A European Youth Forum approach to Youth Policy; Adopted by the General Assembly, November 2006

⁴ The Revised European Youth Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2008)

⁵ 0304-03 European Youth Forum Position Paper on Implementing Common Objectives to enhance the participation of young people and improve information for young people; Adopted by the Council of Members, 25-26 April 2003

As participation in the democratic process is of utmost importance and the right to vote and to be elected are key elements of citizenship, the European Youth Forum calls for the lowering of the voting age to 16. This measure, allowing a better recognition of the views of young people, would encourage them to participate more actively, and to be socialised in a culture of democratic participation from an early age. Studies show that the earlier young people are able to participate in elections, the more likely it is that citizens stay active and committed.⁶ Furthermore, lowering the electoral age would bring a balance to the demographic changes by transferring the intergenerational discourse into parliaments and putting youth issues on the political agenda. Also, young people should have rights that match their responsibilities in democracy, and should be empowered to influence the decisions that have direct consequences for their every day life.⁷ The YFJ is also deeply convinced that political parties need youth and a youth perspective, that they should involve more young people among their candidates and representatives.

As democracy and participation are still too confined on the national level, it is crucial to invest in youth NGOs as cooperation partners of international and supranational institutions and organisations, being regularly consulted on various policy areas.

Therefore, the YFJ welcomes the further development of democratic participation of young people in the European Union through the new European Framework of cooperation in the youth field. Moreover, the co-management system within the Council of Europe, the structures and composition of Joint Council and the Programming Committee on Youth is fully acknowledging the importance of youth participation and youth organisations for democracy.

Participation in democratic decision-making is one of the key priority areas of the UN World Programme on Youth⁸, in relation to which the inclusion of youth delegates in several national delegations to the UN General Assembly is a good practice to be mentioned.

The European Youth Forum believes that it is essential to build upon and further develop existing mechanisms of youth participation in our democratic system. Policies affecting young people and youth organisations need to be developed through democratic co-decision procedures where young people have the same rights and representations as other parties in these procedures. Young people need to gain the duties and responsibilities necessary to build on existing decision structures, and through this be empowered to foster the inclusion of the youth perspective on the political agenda of Europe.

The history of democracy, the collective memory and the level of the involvement of youth civil society in democratic decision making processes differs a lot within Europe. Therefore it needs to be recognised that there are various forms of how young people and youth organisations experience democracy in Europe, and common answers to the diversity of their needs have to be identified in cooperation with all stakeholders.

⁶ Post election study - Austrian Elections 2008 – First time voters aged between 16-18” by SORA (Institute for Social Research and Analysis, the Institute for Strategic Analysis) and The Generational Basis of Turnout Decline in Established Democracies by Mark N. Franklin Trinity College Connecticut and University of Amsterdam

⁷ 0367-06 YFJ Resolution on lowering the electoral age to the age of 16, Adopted 28-29 April 2006

⁸ <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/youthrep.htm>

To mainstream this 'culture of participation', youth organisations, themselves of a voluntary and participatory nature, have a great role to play by providing a solid and democratic representation of the interests of young people through their wide-ranging networks and democratic decision-making procedures. Further, the YFJ is convinced that it is necessary that civil society organisations and NGOs in general need to be open to the participation of young people in order to answer their needs. Youth organisations should commit themselves to recognise and cope with societal development and involve their members in all levels of decision-making processes.

Decision-makers at all levels need to recognise that sustainable democracy depends on participation of all citizens, especially the younger generation, in civil society and civil society organisations. It needs to be fully respected that participatory youth organisations promote and strengthen this understanding and culture of democratic participation from an early age, by drawing on models of participatory democracy.⁹ Furthermore, it is crucial that the autonomy and independence of participatory youth organisations are guaranteed and that their importance in developing active citizenship is recognised by providing sufficient, structural, reliable and sustainable financial resources and ensuring that a legal framework¹⁰ to support them is in place.

3.2. Citizenship Education

Democratic participation and active citizenship need to be understood as lifelong and life wide learning processes. Citizenship education is essential in order to provide young people with the skills that enable them to make choices, take decisions and assume responsibility for their own lives¹¹ within a democratic society. Citizenship education that imparts civic knowledge, explicit facts, and civic skills, as in implicit know-how, is a key element as well as a precondition for democratic participation and active citizenship.

Therefore, the European Youth Forum is convinced that the complementary natures of the three educational fields, formal education, non-formal education and informal learning need to be fully recognised and that cooperation between these fields needs to be fostered in order to educate citizens to fully participate in the society they are living in and to sustain democracy.

Non-formal education¹² is an essential part of a lifelong learning process and youth organisations are a space for and main providers of it. Moreover, the structure of democratic youth organisations gives young people the possibility to experience and learn about the

⁹ 0304-03 European Youth Forum Position Paper on Implementing Common Objectives to enhance the participation of young people and improve information for young people; Adopted by the Council of Members, April 2003

¹⁰ Such a legal framework, ensuring freedom of association and other rights and obligations of association at the national level is indispensable in order to enable sustainability and independence of civil society organisations. Moreover, at the EU level, the initiative to develop a legal statute for European associations, which has been sidelined in the recent past.

¹¹ 0052-04 YFJ Policy Paper on Youth Autonomy; Adopted by the Council of Members, April 2004

¹² 0716-05 YFJ Policy Paper on Recognition of non-formal education; Adopted at the Council of Members November 2005

principles of participatory democracy and active citizenship first hand¹³.

Young people who are active in participatory youth organisations work, or are engaged in activities on behalf of the organisation, have access to and can also be involved in the democratic decision-making processes. They have the capacity to decide on the direction and action of the organisation through its internal democracy mechanisms.¹⁴ Citizenship education as experienced in youth organisations leads to a development of skills, knowledge and attitudes that are usually not acquired within the formal education system. This is because youth organisations and young people gain experience and develop the attitude for democratic behaviour through learning by doing. Youth organisations are increasing the ability of young people to participate as active citizens and are therefore reliable and crucial partners in sustaining democracy in Europe. The contribution of volunteering in this context is critical and should be enhanced. However, youth organisations should not only be understood as play grounds for democracy, because one of their main goals is democratic representation of the interests of young people.

In order for youth NGOs to follow their duties in this regard the Youth Forum demands the full recognition of competences and skills gained through non-formal education within youth organisations as well as the necessary financial and structural support of youth organisations as main providers of non-formal education.

The European Youth Forum is convinced that introducing citizenship education to the mandatory formal education system, considering its blanket coverage and wide ranging influence on the understanding of social norms and democratic structures of each young citizen, is of crucial importance for democracy. It will allow young people to be equally informed about their rights and responsibilities. Considering the specificity of the age group, facing the transition from childhood to adulthood and the lack of a legal framework for youth, citizenship education needs to be understood as crucial. Citizenship education within the formal education field must go beyond conveying information, hard facts and cognitive knowledge on democratic structures, institutions and procedures. The student as learner needs to be understood as a whole person and schools must be perceived as unique spaces for the development of critical, reflexive and interpretative thinking.¹⁵ This would not only require an adaption of the curricula but also appropriate training of teaching staff and must be a guiding measure accompanying lowering the electoral age to 16.

Therefore, the European Youth Forum calls for including citizenship education as an element of global education as an obligatory subject in the guiding principle for school tasks within the formal education system and training for teaching staff in this regard, as well as trainings on participatory teaching methods in general.

Even if informal learning can only be driven by a young person's own interest, access to information and open exposure to a diversity of opinions is essential, if not a precondition for it. Many actors in society have the responsibility to ensure that young people's interest and understanding of democratic decision making processes and democracy as a whole is

¹³ 0716-05 YFJ Policy Paper on Recognition of non-formal education; Adopted at the Council of Members November 2005

¹⁴ 0416-04 YFJ Policy Paper on volunteering; Adopted at the General Assembly November 2004

¹⁵ 0622-07 YFJ contribution to the consultation on "Schools for the 21st Century"

raised.¹⁶ **Therefore, the YFJ calls for a critical and pluralistic media, transparency and openness of political parties and institutions, along with availability and accessibility of ICT tools, being the primary source of information in Europe today.**

The digital divide among young people marks a barrier to engage in e-democracy, and it is firstly characterised by a lack of e-accessibility. Access to computers and the Internet is a necessity to participate in Europe today, as they are the primary source for information and communication¹⁷. The other element is the lack of digital literacy. Therefore, usage of new media and new ways of participation should be an integral part of formal, non-formal and informal education.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Europe should stand for democracy, the respect and protection of political as well as civic rights and the respect of the rule of law. Democracy can only be sustained if all stakeholders and actors in society pro actively foster and maintain democratic values and structures. As democratic participation needs to be understood as a lifelong and life wide learning process, citizenship education has to start at an early age. It is essential that young citizens internalise these democratic principles and are empowered to make responsible decisions.

Civil Society, NGOs and in particular youth organisations in Europe do have the power to strengthen democracy that depends on a culture of democratic participation of citizens that start forming with young people. **In order to sustain and enhance democracy in Europe, youth organisations need to be actively engaged in promoting and defending democracy and free civic participation, both within the organisations themselves and in society in general. For that it is needed to:**

- **Give young people the access and the encouragement to exercise the civil and political rights and duties recognised by democratic society.**
- **Build upon and further develop existing mechanisms of youth participation in democracy. Policies affecting young people need to be developed in democratic co-decision procedures with young people and youth organisations.**
- **Guarantee the autonomy and independence of participatory youth organisations, establishing their importance in developing active citizenship by providing sufficient and structural financial resources as well as ensuring that a legal framework to support them is in place.**
- **Include citizenship education as obligatory subject within the formal education system.**
- **Protect media pluralism and transparency, ensuring its critical role in the coverage of the political process.**
- **Welcome the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) as a unique opportunity to breathe new life into European democracy and strengthen the participation of citizens, especially young people in EU policy-making. Moreover, as a participatory and innovative democratic tool it can help overcome the existing demographic deficit.**
- **Lower the voting age to 16.**

¹⁶ 0007-08 YFJ Policy Paper on Global Education: global vision on education – an education for global citizenship ; Adopted at the Council of Members 2-3 May 2008

¹⁷ 0731-09 YFJ Policy Paper on the Youth Perspective on e-society; Adopted at the Council of Members 2009