



WHERE IS (MISSING) YOUTH POLICY IN SERBIA?

Action Research

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SUMMARY

The text that follows is a result of «Hajde da...» Group project titled «Because it counts!» aimed to empower youth and support development of youth policy. First part of this text is a review of current situation in the field of youth policy in Serbia. It also brings latest results of creation of indicators for process of youth policy assessment, by Council of Europe.

Second part is a description of action research performed as a part of project “Because it counts!” and account of young people’s expectations – both on local and national level - from state institutions and policy makers. The data has been acquired from youth of Subotica, Pančevo and Nova Varoš during action research.

The list of recommendations for development of youth policy in Serbia by “Hajde da...” Group is enclosed at the end of the text.

INTRODUCTION (about youth policy in Serbia, at present)

Did you know that Serbia is among few countries of Europe without national youth policy and even without Ministry for Youth?

Unfortunately, due to constant political disturbances, we are still far away from clear state strategy for youth.

Youth department, within Ministry of Education and Sports, initiated the process of development of National youth strategy¹ during November 2002.

Although this process had been well positioned and in accordance with recommendations of Council of Europe it was politically blocked soon after elections in December 2003, when new Government was elected.

It is obvious that issues of youth and youth policy are not on the priority list of Serbian Government, at this moment. Stated above is clearly certified by the fact that there was no financial resources for youth initiatives, projects and development of youth policy within republic budget for 2004².

The only positive aspect in this field is process of development of Action youth plan, taking place in Vojvodina, thanks to the efforts of Provincial secretariat for sports and youth. This process has come to its final phase.

During preceding period 2002-2003 several relevant researches into the issues of youth life in Serbia have been realized³. These researches are good base for further development of youth policy in our country.

It should be also emphasized that membership in Council of Europe oblige Serbia and Montenegro to apply several conventions and charters on national level. One of the most important documents of this field is European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life, issued by Council of Europe.

There are no real Youth Councils in Serbia – speaking of councils organized by European standards. There are certain organizations, claiming to be “Youth Councils”, whose legitimacy might be questioned. They are merely “not fully transformed structures from period of socialism”. This field should be thoroughly re-structured and organized on new basis and according to current European standards.

¹ Youth department (2002): Letter of intentions, No. 336-00-4/2002-05, Ministry of Education and Sports, Belgrade

² Ministry of Finance (2004) Zakon o budžetu Republike Srbije za 2004. godinu, Beograd
<http://www.mfin.sr.gov.yu/>

³ UNICEF (2002), PRONI (2002), Association of Scout Boys of Vojvodina (2003)

ABOUT YOUTH POLICY IN EUROPE

According to contemporary understanding of youth policy developed within scope of Council of Europe and European Union, national youth policy has to be complete, comprehensive and cross-sectoral state strategy for improvement quality of young people's life. Youth policy is a sort of "contract" between the state and the youth, created through consultative and cooperative relations of government, youth NGOs and young people themselves. Active participation of youth is a cornerstone of every youth policy. Young people themselves and youth organizations should take active part in both creation and implementation of youth policy on national, regional and local level. On Ministry Conference of Council of Europe in Thessalonica (7th – 9th November 2002) Ministries for youth from member states obliged to provide conditions for establishment of *full partnership* with young people and youth organizations in the process of development and implementation of national youth strategies.

According to recommendation of European Youth Forum youth policy mustn't treat young people as "a problem which should be solved, but as resource; and it should define ways of making young people recognize their potentials as citizens and enable society benefit from their intellectual capital"⁴.

Significant stimulation for development of youth policy in Europe was achieved by European Commission's White Paper – A new impetus for European youth (2001), as well as by several documents of Council of Europe, such as European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life (2003).

Youth policy contents is different in each country of Europe. Still, majority of topics can be grouped in 4 key fields:

- Learning
- Inclusion/ Social Cohesion
- Citizenship/ Participation
- Safety/Health/Well-being

In order to define directions for development of youth policy, as well as for evaluation of existing youth strategies, expert group of Council of Europe has defined indicators and standards for European national policies. Results of this process are presented within final report submitted by this group⁵.

This expert group sees the youth policy process as *going towards 'packages' of opportunity and experience*. These are:

1. Learning: (Life Long, formal and non-formal) education and training, recognition of non-formally acquired skills and competencies) – The number of young people active in Life Long Learning, both in formal and non-formal education and equality regarding gender, origin and social and cultural background shall increase. Qualifications acquired in structured and curriculum based non-formal education offers shall be recognized as part of Life Long Learning.

⁴ European Youth Forum, CARE International (2003): Manual for Youth Work, Banja Luka

⁵ Council of Europe (2003): Experts on Youth Policy Indicators, third and concluding meeting - Final Report, Strasbourg

2. Access to New Technologies - The number of young people having access to New Technologies and being trained in using them to the best of their advantage shall increase.

3. Specialist personal advice and support, career guidance - The proportion of young people in member countries who receive specialist personal advice and support and vocational guidance shall increase.

4. Information - The number of youth information centers, youth information services in the media and youth information contact points in member countries and the proportion of young people making good use of this offer shall increase.

5. Access to health services and social protection - The number of young people decided to live a healthy lifestyle shall increase and so shall the health and social protection services providing guidance and assistance.

6. Access to housing - The proportion of local authorities, which in co-operation with central government care for creating access to suitable housing schemes for young people shall increase.

7. Access to paid work - The number of young people finding access to paid work must increase.

8. Mobility - The number of opportunities of mobility of young people in order to enlarge their intercultural and personal experiences and their professional qualifications shall increase.

9. Justice and youth rights (e.g. to assistance) - The number of countries introducing a specific youth legislation and practicing a youth justice system shall increase.

10. Opportunities to participation and active citizenship - The number of central and local government measures aimed at giving young people real opportunities to practice active citizenship, to participate in public life and to use freedom of speech and association shall increase.

11. Recreational, cultural and social - The opportunities for young people to take part in recreational and cultural opportunities and/or to become active in social and voluntary services shall increase.

12. Sports and outdoor activities - Occasions to practice sport and outdoor activities shall increase, and where they do not exist yet, be created.

13. Away from home, youth exchange and international experiences - Young people shall be given opportunities for stays away from home from a very young age and their proportion to take part in international exchanges in the forms of both studies and practical experiences shall increase.

14. Safe and secure environment - The proportion of young people who are victims of crime and violent acts and the proportion of young people who are perpetrators of violence shall decrease.

Indicators are meant to show what countries are doing for young people and how they are doing this. If we want to develop national policy according European standards – as it should be done in Serbia – these indicators can be very significant directions in that process. Of course, it should be emphasized that final version of National strategy for youth has to consider both needs of young people and cultural/social specificities of young people's every day life within community.

ABOUT PROJECT OF “HAJDE DA...” GROUP

Youth project “Because it counts!” of “Hajde da...” Group is another contribution to process of youth policy development in Serbia. Our intention was to gather useful inputs and we decided to do it by means of action research, this time. It was conducted during workshops of **Personal empowerment program** with 3 groups of young people.

What issues worry/inspire young people in Serbia today? What expectations youth has from policy makers on local and national level? What ideas young people can offer?

First phase of this one-year project was three-month educational program of personal empowerment. It was realized with three groups of young people from 3 Serbian towns. Since multicultural social setting is our reality and for the reason of cultural rights and intercultural processes being synchronized by youth policy, we deliberately pick three towns with distinctive multiethnic features – Subotica, Pančevo and Nova Varoš. Program of personal empowerment is based on contemporary methodological principles of good non-formal education for youth. It includes voluntary participation, use of participatory methods, fostering of cooperation within group, learning from personal experience and learner-centeredness. Non-formal education mustn't be regarded as an opposition to official school system, but as quality supplement of formal education, the one that achieves long lasting results with fewer resources because it is flexible, practical and always in touch with 'real life'.

Some researches on life of young people in Serbia certified that they hold considerable accumulated energy for social activism, but they don't know how to use it. Generally, young people are not attracted to political parties and they have no proper information about other forms of social activism.

For that reason “Hajde da...”Group has chosen **action research** method intended to explore and work on solving of the problem at the same time.

This research has been realized as integral part of youth personal empowerment program. Our main idea was to help young people determine their capacities and shortcomings, as well as opportunities and barriers of particular community, because only then they can provide inputs relevant for development of youth policy in Serbia.

During three months of work trainers-researchers have conducted their groups through the process of improvement of personal identity awareness including realizing of personal capacities, values, attitude towards change and exploring personal and social visions. The most distinctive feature of personal empowerment program is the fact that it is based on principle of raising

awareness and being focused on individual vision, instead of getting stuck in the problems and obstacles.

Only being in contact with personal vision and being aware of all options, one can properly define his/her expectations from himself/herself, other people, the state, future, etc. Majority of our participants have considered these topics in structured and constructive way for the first time.

This process was realized with three groups of young people from Subotica, Pančevo and Nova Varoš from March till May 2004 and it was continued during **Summer youth camp “Tools for Action”**; the Camp was aimed to help these young people acquire some practical leadership skills (negotiation, advocacy, PR, project planning, Art for social change) which can be used in struggle for promotion of their ideas within local community and wider setting.

WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE’S PRIORITIES IN SERBIA?

During our work with youth on the Personal empowerment program we gathered data which presents expectations of these young people from youth policy makers - both individuals and institutions - on national and also on local level.

(NON FORMAL) EDUCATION

«I liked the fact we were all different and these workshops helped us exchange our experience and become a real team».

Young people we have worked with were totally aware of significance of education. They were also extremely dissatisfied with quality of education offered by formal education system at this moment. When asked about regular school, majority of these young people stated following notions: *change, improvement, reform, better*.

Concerning educators’ approach, most of young participants thought “They (educators) should understand needs of young people, as well as their values and priorities”. Need for more high schools and faculties in smaller towns and lower education costs were also outlined.

Most of participants made first contact with non-formal education during this very Program. Their comments on non-formal education methods were very positive. They stated that practice and methods within non-formal education are very appropriate for work with youth (“they should be applied more often”). What they liked the most was “experience exchange, freedom of thought and expression”, relaxed atmosphere and team work.

PARTICIPATION

«If I would be minister for youth, I would do only one thing – I would listen to them!»

Participants of our Program requested more space for active participation on local and national level. Of course, term ‘space’ was not referring only to physical space (which is extremely important for youngsters from

Pančevo) but first of all to possibilities for social activism and active citizenship..

One participant from Nova Varoš said: “people in charge should listen to us, pay attention to our needs and demands and should help us organize better”. Other participants have stated some similar statements: “young people should have the right to vote”, “government should understand us and offer us more possibilities” and “young people have to be persistent and to endure in fight for their rights”.

Young people from Pančevo believe that local authorities “should conduct serious and thorough survey in order to determine young people’s needs” and they “should form special group for work and contacts with youth”. Youngsters from Subotica were sure that authority representatives “should provide opportunities for young people to act independently and to achieve some positive changes for themselves.” Young people demand their rights regarding youth policy creation on local level, saying that “youth policy should be equal and adjusted to needs and interests of youth.”

INNOVATIVE IDEAS AND CREATIVITY OF YOUTH

«Society should have understanding for young people and their ideas.»

Young people in our country need support from society and adults in general, especially in the field of creative work and new innovative ideas. This part of their lives young people perceive as space for personal realization and consequently, lack of support (understanding and finances) is always very frustrating. One participant from Pančevo said: “Society has to be open for new ideas, even though there is certain risk, because not all new ideas are successful. Support and motivation are very important, especially regarding creative work because that kind of engagement, at least makes their lives better.”

Perhaps representatives of authorities and civil sector should consider creating special educational programs for development of youth creativity and directing good ideas into concrete actions.”

BUDGET FOR YOUTH AND YOUTH PROJECTS

«I would increase budget for youth NGOs – three times!»

Support is important, but it has to be in financial form, also. Majority of young participants simply doesn’t see possibilities for financing youth projects and initiatives. All of them (participants from all three towns) expect local and republic authorities to make efforts and establish specific “funds for financing youth projects”. Just as one participant said “if we had funds and support from relevant structures, we could make our town realize what matters to us”.

RECREATIONAL, SOCIAL, CULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND SPORTS

«At least one day of the week should be – Event Day!»

Sport activities are very important to young people from Nova Varoš. They have great expectations from local authorities and one of their hopes is “building the new sport stadium” in town. Youngsters from Pančevo expect better selection of spare time activities. One of our participants stated: “I would open new clubs and several places appropriate for live performance and concerts”. Young people from Subotica would like to have a proper Youth Center in their town, more youth clubs and cafes. Here is a suggestion given by one participant: “I would encourage young people to live actively, to make friends and spend a lot of time with each other, to go in for sports.”

✚ HEALTHY LIFE STYLE AND ECOLOGY

“I would reduce drug addiction (if it can’t be eliminated)”

For participants from all three towns drug addiction is one of the most serious problems young people are facing today. It is worth mentioning that majority of them stated they expect from republic (not local) authorities to react and initiate the processes in order to reduce current number of drug addicts and prevent possible increase.

Ecological issues are especially important to young people from Pančevo, of course. They developed original project with the intention to present it to local authorities. The Project includes arranging of Public Garden in order to transform it into pleasant place “where any body could come to picnic, visit nice concert, exhibition or play”. One of the participants said: “I would clean entire town (with my own hands, if necessary) and plant a lot of trees and bushes”.

✚ MOBILITY AND YOUTH EXCHANGES

“I would promote activities that would bring youth from different towns together and enable them to make friends all over the country”

Young participants from all groups shared common impression that Serbian youngsters don’t have enough opportunities to travel and meet each other, not to mention youth from abroad. Having that in mind, it is absolutely comprehensible they long for “more excursions”. It is also logical they would like more summer camps and similar activities (like those organized by Ministry of Education in 2002) as well as organization of “students’ exchange program” with other European countries. This sort of meetings, camps and youth exchange would be not only useful for their social development, but also an important chance for intercultural studies.

WHAT CAN YOU, YOUNG PEOPLE, DO ?

It is important that young people have great responsibilities, along with their great expectations. They also have the right to take active part in social processes which concern them. At the same time, they are great source of energy. Following statements given by young participants from Subotica, Pančevo and Nova Varoš certify outlined above.

Here are some answers to question (“What can you, young people, do?”), we asked our participants at the end of the Program of personal empowerment:

- we have to persist in the fight for our rights
- we can improve development of youth in many aspects if only government would be more cooperative
- we could do anything if we decided to
- we can do a lot of things, to help process of solving some problems and to completely resolve others.
- we can try to be organized and to influence and change things which concern us TOGETHER
- we can try to achieve our aims
- we should be determined and firm in order to achieve even small changes, because some 'small' contribution can mean a lot
- we can do a lot of positive things, but we need strong support
- we can demonstrate our capacities through various actions and activities
- well, we can do a lot of things! what are you exactly interested in?
- a lot of things, maybe even too much ☺
- we can fight for our aims, what ever they were, but we should stick together
- we can do a lot, just give us the chance!
- we can offer new ideas and plans, in details!
- we are able of achieving our aims and aspirations, what ever it takes
- we can achieve what we want to, but only if we're persistent
- we can change the world with all this energy we have
- well, we can do anything, if we have vision!!!
- we can do everything or nothing at all – it depends how much do we really want it

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH POLICY IN SERBIA

Having in mind European standards (COE, EU), as well as the needs of young people observed during project “Because it counts!”, “Hajde da...” Group has defined several recommendations regarding further development of youth policy. They are intended for state institutions of Serbia and other relevant civil society organizations:

- The interrupted process of development of National strategy for youth should be continued, as soon as possible, in the manner presented within Letter of intentions, by Youth department in November 2002.
- Cooperative relations and system of co-management have to be established between governmental bodies and those civil society organizations run by youth and/or working with youth.
- Cross-sectorial cooperation between different ministries has to be founded not only during process of development, but also during implementation of National youth strategy
- Cooperation of Serbian government with European institutions (COE, EU) should be improved (or re-established where needed)
- Implementation of significant European documents, such as «European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life” by Council of Europe, should be supported by republic and local authorities
- Special funds aimed for projects and initiatives of youth and youth organizations should be created, on local and republic level
- To consider needs of young people observed during previous researches (PRONI, UNICEF, Scout Boy Association of Vojvodina; and also during project “Because it Counts!” by “Hajde da...” Group) as basis for definition of National youth strategy priorities
- Development and promotion of non-formal education in Serbia should be supported, as important form of learning; special formal instruments for social recognition and validation of non-formal learning need to be established
- Future youth policy should be based on values of democracy, human rights and social cohesion and should determinedly promote these

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