

Seminar:
“What is the interest of young people and youth organisations in relation to the new generation of EU programmes?”
Brussels, December 9th 2011

Introduction

On the 9th of December 2011 the General Secretariat of the BENELUX, in cooperation with the National Youth Council and the National Youth Service from Luxembourg have invited youngsters to the cross border seminar “What is the interest of young people and youth organisations in relation to the new generation of EU programmes?”. Thirty young people, mainly former beneficiaries of the Youth in Action Programme, representatives of National Youth Councils and Youth organisations, coming from the BENELUX countries, Austria and Germany, followed the call and met in Brussels in order to debate on the proposal of the Commission for the new generation youth programme “Erasmus for all”.

In 5 working groups, framed by facilitators, the participants formulated their demands concerning the new generation of Youth programmes to European Authorities. The representants of several Ministries and National Agencies were present as resource persons during these discussions.

1. Shut up and study! A youth program reduced to students?

“Erasmus for all – who exactly is meant by the “all” in this?” This is one of the first questions raised in the framework of this workshop.

The legal base of the proposal is rather “thin” and reduces young people to students by only offering opportunities in the framework of higher education and student’s mobility. However, it is impossible to reduce young people to one single target group. The young population is characterized by vast diversity with many different needs requiring different and very specific approaches for formal and non-formal learning. The proposal of the EU-Commission is completely lacking this diversification of approaches. For a long period of time young people with fewer opportunities have been a priority for the Youth in Action program, whereas their priority in the new proposal stays unclear. The new generation of programs needs to reach out to disadvantaged young people and foresee specific support for them. It is therefore essential for the future European Youth programme to clearly define and diversify the different target groups.

In this same context it is important that the program adopts a specific approach through the local level and youth organisations on a small scale. These local actors are very important as they know the youngsters and their difficulties and see them in their actual context. This concept is however completely missing in the proposal. This is why the EU programs should opt for a bottom-up approach and return to grassroots, by further promoting actions like Youth Initiatives and Youth Democracy projects, actions that are not mentioned at all.

Formal education is the core point in the proposal of the EU-Commission and it by that neglects the added value of non formal and informal learning. Formal learning is too restrictive and does not reach all target groups; this is why non-formal and informal education need to be strongly emphasized. By putting weight on more economic issues such as employability the proposal completely dismisses the promotion of those principles, values and social rights that have been essential for the Youth in Action programme. These are core values of the European Union and participants invite the European Commission to keep their promotion as one of the main objectives of the future EU youth programme.

2. Structured Dialogue – a myth? What happened to the voice of civil society and youth?

The Structured Dialogue is an important tool and its implementation is of great importance for the participation of young people and youth organisations in the construction of Europe's future. Nevertheless participants established that there seems to be a growing gap between the Commission and young people in Europe. The result of this breach is a lack of trust in the EU and in EU policy.

The Structured Dialogue is in general being seen as a very positive concept, the process and the contents themselves are however too complicated and vague. It does therefore not really help young people to feel closer to the EU. The questions are too technical, timings too short so that consultations do not really give young people a chance to express their opinion. Furthermore the impact of the outcomes of the different cycles of consultation on the actual decision making on EU-level is not clear.

In order to overcome Euro-skepticism and the previously described gap between the Commission and European youth, participants underline the significance of developing a European citizenship. This should be one of the main goals of EU youth programmes. The proposal of the Commission is however neglecting this important tool and its added value in the promotion of active citizenship and participation of young people.

Participants invite the EU-Commission to further develop and support the Structured Dialogue as a significant consultation tool in a bottom-up approach within the new program. In this context they also underline the need to keep a local dimension within the Structured Dialogue, giving young people from very different backgrounds the opportunity to express their opinion.

In order to improve the Structured Dialogue participants of the working group make two suggestions:

They ask the Commission to give a real feedback after each consultation cycle, so to show young people that their opinion has been taken into account. Furthermore the Structured Dialogue should be completed by more direct interaction between the Commission and young people in Europe and by more space for real dialogue during events and specific workshops.

3. Young and reduced to human capital?

The proposal of the Commission for the "Erasmus for all" program has a clear economic orientation. Young people are considered as "human capital" and the proposal prioritizes the promotion of the employability of young people in Europe, which leaves their personal development in the back seat.

For the participants it is clear that employability is not the only important characteristic of a citizen and that it will not be enough to strengthen and further develop the European Union. Any reduction of EU citizens to "human capital" is neglecting the concept of citizenship and leaving behind our common European values.

Up to now the Youth in Action Program has contributed to the feeling of being European by giving youngsters the possibility to be in some way active in Europe. Citizenship, according to the definition of the working group, is participation in democracy, contribution to the community, consciousness in society and contribution to personal development. It is therefore a very important concept in times of crisis and austerity. Nevertheless this substantial concept is not mentioned by one single word in the proposal of the Commission. "Erasmus for all" puts its main focus on the formal education system. Participants agree that instead of taking away these opportunities, one should put effort in creating more favorable circumstances promoting citizenship and participation for all young people.

Youth organisations are very important actors and play a significant role in the development of active and responsible citizenship. They are the actual link to local groups, a level that should not be dismissed. Participants therefore invite the European Commission to intensify

their efforts to involve young people on the local level, this for example by keeping actions such as the Youth Initiatives and Youth Exchanges.

4. Youth organisations put to the edge! Why take away opportunities for small organisations and youngsters in the new European countries?

Despite a substantial increase in budget the new proposal of the European Commission raises fear of severe cut backs in support for Youth organisations and projects of informal groups. As youth organisations are not even mentioned in the proposal there is a risk that especially the role of local level and small organisations might be dismissed. Youth organisations offer small scale opportunities to the full diversity of young people so to get active and integrate in their local community. They assure the link to groups and youngsters on local level and give as such visibility to the EU on local level and are essential for non-formal learning. One should therefore not underestimate the impact of small youth structures. Small organisations would have to compete with big structures such as universities and as consequence lose the chance to get grants for networking, training activities or exchange of best practices. Especially for those countries which have recently joined the EU a cut down in support for youth organisations in these countries would have a big impact and close a door to opportunities that have only recently been created.

Apart from the lacking support for Youth organisations in the proposal, participants are concerned about support for activities and projects informal groups of youngsters, as the proposal does not refer to actions such as Youth Exchanges and Youth Initiatives. For many young people the Youth in Action programme has been the only opportunity to participate, to be creative and active and to get financial support for their self-initiated projects. By neglecting the impact of self initiated projects on youngsters, the EU Commission seems to disregard how much these projects contribute to the personal development of young people. Putting all the weight on formal education will on one hand make young people lose an alternative to being part of an institution and on the other reduce recognition of non formal learning.

5. Education happens only in schools! A slap in the face for non-formal education?

Participants of this workshop agreed all on the importance of non-formal education. Young people develop life competences through non-formal learning. Life competences that are important to tackle the question of employability that is of course one of the most pressing issues for young people at this time. These competences are also crucial on the long run, because they provide a cost-efficient way to prevent risk, delinquency and they promote health, well-being and social skills.

How much does a day in prison cost? How much does a school drop-out cost to society? How much does it cost to support someone who is unemployed?

The formal education system is not sufficient to develop all skills that are needed to fully participate in our society. A lot of complementary competences that are fundamental for the fulfillment of young people's full potential are being developed outside the school context. Moreover this, non-formal education remains the only opportunity for disadvantaged young people, who often have dropped out of formal education, to develop themselves,.

With Youth in Action there was a program supporting this. The European Commission valued this in the Commission Staff Working Paper (SEC(2011) 868 final) that accompanies the proposed MFF: 'Its added value relates to aspects such as the non-formal learning scope, active participation of youth and the fact that young people with fewer opportunities are a specific target.'

Participants wonder then why this is not reflected in the proposal of the European Commission. The current proposal underestimates the value of Non-formal Education and brings with it the focus on formal education by using the branding Erasmus. With the branding Erasmus we also lose the networks and body of knowledge around the previous programme when users were skilled in applying it. 85 % of the respondents in the consultation set up by the EC among users of the Youth in Action programme wanted to maintain a separate programme and were happy with it. Why has the Commission ignored this in its proposal?

Non-formal Education should be put at an equal level of importance as formal education. We believe that reinforcing the school system is important, but should be accompanied by empowering the organisations and mechanisms that provide NFE opportunities. The impact of NFE can be measured. The EU has done good efforts in developing and promoting the recognition of instruments that validate it, like the Youthpass. We would like to see that the EU continues on this path and strengthens it.

Conclusions

Participants of the seminar “What is the interest of young people and youth organisations in relation to the new generation of EU programmes?”:

- underline the support given by the “Youth in Action” programme to the European citizenship of young people
- suggest the Commission to reconsider the idea of merging the EU youth programmes and propose to have either two separate programmes or at least two separate budgets for the different priorities. Furthermore participants would like to stress the importance of separate National Agencies for the contact with youth organisations and young people on local level;
- invite the EU Commission to diversify the target group of the new EU youth program and grant specific support to disadvantaged young people;

ask the Commission to take into account unorganised young people and informal groups of young people, especially on local level, by further proposing actions such as Youth Initiatives and Youth Democracy projects;
- wish to remind the Commission that small youth organisations (on local level) can also have big impact and demand the Commission to further support their work;
- urge the Commission to promote a bottom-up approach by further implementing developing, improving, and supporting the Structured Dialogue;
- call upon the Commission to put a greater emphasis on non-formal learning and recognise the significant role of youth organisations and actions such as the Youth Initiative and Youth Democracy projects in this area;
- would like to stress that EU youth programmes should also continue to promote European values such as active citizenship, participation and social values, fundamental for the functioning and the visibility of the European Union.