

“Challenges and Perspectives of Citizenship Education in Central and South Eastern Europe”
11th-13th September 2009, Zagreb, Croatia

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Report

Workshop 2

Personal Engagement – Grassroot Organisations – Citizenship Education

by Ivana Ranđelović
Freelance Youth Trainer, Belgrade

The focus of this workshop was on young people, because they were identified as the main actors in grassroots organisations and the ones that citizenship education is addressed to. The workshop was divided into two parts:

1. three speakers from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia presented the situation in the youth sector, grassroots activism and personal engagement in their countries;
2. discussion on key questions identified during the speakers' presentations and panel discussions on the day before.

Aims of the workshop:

1. to map the situation in the field of the youth sector in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia;
2. to create a framework for a dialogue between youth workers and civil society experts;
3. to identify small steps to improve the personal engagement of young people and citizenship education.

First, the speakers presented themselves and their organisations. They were youth organisations, engaged in youth activism and informal education. The speakers were from Croatia – Sanja Vuković-Čović, Director of the PRONI Centre for Social Education, from Bosnia – Aida Vehabovic, Manager of the Bosnia and Herzegovina office of the NGO and foundation “Schüler Helfen Leben” (SHL) in Sarajevo, and from Serbia – Martina Petrovic, Vice President of the Club, “Youth takes action” (YTA), Belgrade.

At the beginning of the workshop, the speakers gave inputs about the youth sector in their respective countries in the following three areas that were recognised as important:

- ⇒ personal engagement and grassroots activism;
- ⇒ youth policy;
- ⇒ citizenship education – formal/ non formal

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During this session some issues were brought up that were important, though they were not in the initial focus of the workshop. While presenting the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) talking about nuances in Civic Education and youth activism turned out to be absurd, when having “two schools under one roof” as common type of educational institution. “Two schools under one roof” describes having two schools in one building, each for pupils from different ethnicities. These pupils and teachers don’t communicate with each other and have different school programmes - a model which is supported by representatives of the international community in Bosnia. The participants agreed that the role of the civil sector is to advocate this situation to change as soon as possible, in order to provide a better environment for the development of youth activism and citizenship education in general.

After presenting the situation in these three countries, some similarities in the field of youth activism were identified:

- ⇒ in the area of local youth policy, it was found that in Serbia, Croatia and part of Bosnia (Republic of Srpska) there are local offices for youth which are not functioning as expected.
- ⇒ in Serbia youth offices are still in the process of establishing structures and procedures of their day-to-day routine;
- ⇒ in Bosnia and Croatia they formally have existed for a long time now, but without any practical results.
- ⇒ Given the fact that local youth offices should encourage young people in their initiatives, a possible conclusion could be that one of many causes for a generally low level of youth activism could be found here.

In the second part of the workshop, three important but very complex questions were brought up. The methods used in this session were working in small groups, presentations of results of each group followed by a discussion. Questions discussed in the different groups were:

1. How can we motivate young people to become active citizens in modern information societies?
2. What is the role of school teachers and the school environment?
3. What role does the general loss of trust and confidence in politics play for young people’s motivation to participate in political/ social life?

1. Motivation in the era of modern media

The idea for this question was to focus on a young person today and his/her needs, interests and resources available to him/her. In the discussion of this topic, the first aspect agreed upon was that modern media types are very powerful tools which can be used for promoting and encouraging youth activism, if used in the right way. Social networks can disseminate information, and provide a place for discussion, exchange of opinions and promotion of important activities.

During the discussion of the first session, another problem was mentioned: the lack of ideas on how to broaden the target group, instead of constantly targeting the same people. Some of the participants considered rewards, grants and recognition in the community to be a good instrument to increase motivation. Others considered that creating a “cool” image of youth activism is of crucial importance. Participants were also concerned about not imposing actions and initiatives on young people, but to ask them about their needs and ideas instead: to include them into the planning process as well, and to produce a sense of ownership of the initiatives.

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A positive first experience is crucial, in other words: “success brings success”. There is also a difference regarding the sources of motivation of young people; it depends on: their age, rural or urban background, level of education etc.

One of the tools for increasing the level of motivation was encouraging non-formal education programmes, volunteer engagement and personal engagement in general. One of the suggestions was to establish a number of obligatory hours in community work, but the question is: Can someone be obliged to be active?

The three steps that were identified as the most important were:

- a. Ask young people about their needs – constant assessment.
- b. Facilitate and monitor their initiatives (so they do not end up with non-democratic initiatives);
- c. Long-term involvement and support (not only being present for one action or one programme, but support youth groups for a longer time – year and more).

2. School teachers and school environment

What could be achieved by citizenship education in school if many teachers do not support democratic values; if the atmosphere in schools doesn't contribute to the development of a democratic system?

The first conclusion was that continuous education of teachers in all subjects in the area of democratic values was badly needed. A critical mass of teachers which can contribute to a positive atmosphere and influence the decision making process in schools is extremely important was in-school citizenship education. Also, finding ways to create a network of active and enthusiastic people and to provide adequate rewards for their work (certificates or something similar) were considered to be important.

Good teaching material containing experiences and the best examples of teaching in practice (in other countries), interesting case studies, specific methods, as well as creating a “teaching elite” that has access to these materials which should be free of charge for them.

3. Regaining lost trust

The matter of trust was divided into two categories:

- ⇒ the trust in the public sector in general;
- ⇒ the trust in politicians.

Since we were running out of time, this question was discussed briefly. The conclusion was there was never any significant trust in politicians and political institutions in the first place, and that the main goal for the future is to create a new, young and well-educated political elite which is able to build up a new relationship between civil society and the state. .