Towards a more inclusive society: what youth organizations can do

Policy Paper

Nowadays societies are facing a higher number of excluded youth in different areas of social life. The perception is growing around the globe that youth are in a great risk of exclusion from the society in plenty of ways. This policy brief comes as a need in addressing two main problems:

- the social exclusion of disadvantaged young people
- The lack of communication among stakeholders (existing gap between youth organizations, communities and authorities).

The aim of this policy paper is to advocate for a society for all people based on mutual respect, solidarity and understanding, emphasizing the disadvantages that young people, especially from marginalized groups are facing today. By promoting social inclusion of marginalized groups, we are giving recommendations for the future actions to be achieved using multi-stakeholder approach, enhancing cooperation between all actors (organizations, communities and authorities) in order to enable youth empowerment and full involvement in the society.

What is Social Exclusion?

There are a lot of definitions of the term "social exclusion" as it involves different dimensions (economic, social, political, cultural etc). The term Social Exclusion first originated in Europe, where spatial exclusion came into focus [1]. Social Exclusion can relate both to non-material characteristic (relational dimension) and to material aspects (distributional dimension)[2].
Usually, social exclusion is considered as a concept relating two main aspects: economic-structural exclusion and social-cultural exclusion. Social exclusion is described as "the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society in which they live" (European Foundation 1995: 4; cited in de Haan and Maxwell 1998: 2).

Social Exclusion is described as a process which is characterized by the denial of entitlement to resources and services as well as the denial of the right to participate on equal terms in social relationships in economic, social, cultural or political areas. Social exclusion is a process that occurs when particular groups are excluded by mainstream society from fully participating in economic, social, cultural and political life. Some of the reasons for which youths are excluded from equal participation can be poverty, disability, racism, gender discrimination.

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[1] http://www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/social-exclusion/definitions-and-different-understandings-of-social-exclusion
[2] www.justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/access-control-resources-social-exclusion-batliwala-veneklasen.pdf

Different aspects of the Social Exclusion can be summarized as[3]:

- Experiencing poor living conditions (in terms of housing, nutrition, clothing, physical safety)
- Being unable to participate in the social and political life of one's community (not out of choice but as a result of obstacles encountered)
- Being unable to enjoy cultural and recreational activities as a result of obstacles encountered
- Suffering from health conditions as a result of poor living conditions and experiencing obstacles in accessing health care and social services when needed
- Suffering from an emotional and psychological sense of exclusion and isolation from the community or from society at large

Social Exclusion is a process that is rooted in social inequalities, that limits participation of the youths in different areas of social life, such as accessibility for quality education and training, securing adequate employment, suffering from discriminatory practices and attitudes. In other words social exclusion places the youngsters outside of the world of the opportunities. It changes the reality they face every day making it not promising for their future. In order to make positive changes in their life there is first of all an immediate need for inclusion of them in the society by fostering education and trainings, offering and suggesting concrete opportunities for integrating in the labour market, by creating real inclusion tied specially to the non-formal education as an important tool for engagement of the youngsters in meeting different people and cultures, opening a window towards a promising future.

What is Social Inclusion?

Terminologically "social inclusion" is referred to the participation of the people fully in life from an economic, social and cultural perspective.[4] If a person is excluded from society he/she does not have equal access services, facilities, resources, power and opportunity. This term is generally used to describe the opposite effects of the "social exclusion". Around Europe youth represent the highest risk group that is facing unemployment, lack of opportunities in education and training, poverty, discrimination, risk of exclusion in everyday life. A special support and focus should be given to the disadvantaged young people, as well as to the people with fewer opportunities. Youngsters with fewer opportunities are facing more obstacles which prevent them from being a normal part of the society, they have a limited access to formal and non-formal education, they encounter more problems as it comes to entering labour market, they are usually not taking part in the decision making and are not actively acting in the society.

Combating poverty is a main component of social inclusion since poverty can trigger a number of processes of exclusion, for example in the areas of education, employment, as well in different areas of social life and participation in society.

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[3] http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/social_exclusion_and_youth_work.pdf

[4] http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/esf/docs/sf_social_inclusion_en.pdf

Therefore, one of the main objectives of governments and authorities should be to fight those obstacles which are part of the everyday reality of the youngsters. The process of inclusion of the disadvantaged youth comes as a very urgent need that is affecting the growing process of them as well. Including the youth into this process will enable the development of their own personality, creativity, their own opinions, ideas, self-confidence, their capability of taking responsibilities and as well acting independently in the social life.

Europe 2020 Strategy raises "the needs for ensuring access to education, training and the working life, particularly through the promotion and recognition of non-formal education/learning support the transition from education to the labour market, for example by strengthening possibilities to reconcile private and working life; support autonomy, well-being, access to appropriate living conditions; ensure equal access to cultural, sports and creative activities; encouraging intergenerational dialogue and solidarity".*[5]* The process of promoting social inclusion of the youth requires the cooperation of the government authorities, European Institutions as promoters of Human Rights and Social Justice. However, the member states are the key players in order to acquire a proper implementation of the strategy. Therefore, the translation of the Europe2020 Strategy into national reachable targets requires more investment towards the overall process.

The need for Social Inclusion

The social inclusion of the disadvantaged youth is a need that is essentially important to accomplish. The process of social exclusion can affect all age groups, and in today's society, any young person who deviates in any way from the norms can become a subject of social exclusion. It may be connected to a person's social class, educational status, living standards, disability, minority background or sexual preference, amongst others. Youngsters are the largest target group that is exposed to fall into the social exclusion process. When this happens, they are blocked from rights, resources, services and opportunities, such as housing, employment, health care and democratic participation. In a lot of cases, youngsters are left alone, without the support of the people, institutions around them. Negative attitudes are unfortunately also aimed at them. Ensuing poverty, emotional and psychological trauma may result in catastrophic damage to young people's lives.

The outcome of social exclusion is that affected individuals or communities are prevented from fully participating in the economic, social and political life of the society in which they live. Social Inclusion can be seen as a process, in which youth organizations work against circumstances and habits that lead to social exclusion. Youth organizations have a big impact on social inclusion of the young people and are the best promoters that are working to prevent the process of social exclusion. This is a key element to social integration. The activities carried out by Youth Organizations, based on the non-formal education methods, are a great opportunity for youngsters to meet each other in order to share their ideas and opinions about different issues concerning their everyday reality in different parts of Europe.

In the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights"[6], several articles refer to social rights. In general, these can be understood as rights which are needed for full participation in the society:

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[5] http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

[6] http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/

- Article 7 of the Universal Declaration states "The right to be equal for the law (no discrimination)". In other words all are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.
- Article 22 grants "The right to social security": Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.
- Articles 23 and 24 state "The right to work, rest and leisure": Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself/herself and his/her family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.
- Article 25: "The right to adequate standard of living, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, etc" is granted. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself/herself and of his/her family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- Article 26. "The right to education": Education should be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.

Youth Organizations and Youth Work

Young people gain wide knowledge and experience by participating in volunteering activities organized by youth organizations. Such organizations work to prevent young people to become the subject of social exclusion by knowing their needs and thus involving them in activities that stimulate their will to socialize and discover new realities and possibilities, with the aim of preventing youngsters from being socially excluded and integrate those who are already living in a social exclusion condition. Furthermore, youth organizations also develop and implement projects and campaigns aiming at raising the global awareness about the risks of social exclusion and how to tackle this problem, as well as being providers of non-formal education and informal learning opportunities. Non-formal education and informal learning give the chance to young people to learn by doing and by experiencing rather than learning from text books.

Youth Organizations can provide different activities, addressing the various needs of young people, which vary from workshops, street actions and events organized at local level to seminars, training courses and campaigns organized at national and international level.

Through their involvement in such activities young people gain valuable knowledge about how to

work in a team/group as members and/or coordinators, they develop their interpersonal skills as well as their self-confidence, problem solving, conflict resolution and intercultural skills.

The role of youth organizations is to inform and encourage youngsters to be part of the activities and to learn as much as possible during them. This is a very important process that is related directly with the Social Inclusion of Youngsters.

Non-formal education can provide an alternative learning pathway to those whose 'needs and wants' are not met in the classroom. "Young people who have left school early or who are in precarious situations in society could benefit from non-formal education as a second chance that could have a strong impact in their lives".[7]

Non formal education is a very useful way to empower young people to set up their own ideas and experience in the projects. The skills that the youngsters are gaining during the non-formal activities organized locally or abroad are highly important in the self-development and can be very good practice for the development of their future career. The content of those activities encourage young people to reflect on common values between each other such: Human Rights, Freedom, Peace, and Equality. Those activities are also a great opportunity for youngsters to improve their language skills, to become aware about the cultures and values of other countries and to develop a sense of respect and tolerance. Working in an intercultural environment, makes also young people develop a sense of belonging to a larger world, without any nationality boundaries.

In order to achieve Social Inclusion of the youngsters in the community life first of all it is very important that youth organizations and authorities open the way for dialogue between each other. The open space for dialogue will create the opportunity for both sides to listen and promote understanding between participants in the dialogue.

Recommendations

Through this policy paper, addressed both to local/national authorities responsible for the development of youth policies and youth organizations, we, YEU, want to express our vision on the fundamental actions that have to be taken in order to effectively tackle the social exclusion of young people. The present recommendations are developed following two key actions: the production and implementation of actions from the side of youth organizations and local/national authorities, and the improvement of the dialogue between these two actors in order to increase the political participation of youth organizations in the decision-making process:

1. To develop and implement activities which work on the social inclusion of youngsters from minority and/or marginalized groups.

2. To improve the dialogue and the cooperation between stakeholders involved in the development and the implementation of actions targeting social inclusion. (Local organizations, communities and authorities).

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[7] T-Kit on Social Inclusion', Council of Europe and European Commission Partnership, p.39

1. **To develop and implement activities which work on the social inclusion of youngsters from minority and/or marginalized groups:**

a. To develop activities focusing on exchange of roles/identities between youngsters from different backgrounds.

When tackling the issue of social inclusion (that many times is strongly tied to different cultural and social schemes) it is very important to use the correct approaches and methodologies. Non Formal Education can be used to create tools aiming at experiencing the reality of the majority/minority groups; the exchange of roles and identities in activities involving young people is useful to promote tolerance, understanding and mutual respect among groups with different backgrounds by letting them experience the life faced everyday by the other groups.

b. To provide the space for the implementation of activities aiming at tackling social exclusion of young people

We believe that activities addressing social exclusion should be part of the growth and learning process of the greatest number of young people possible. Therefore, it is important to strive for the implementation of activities addressing social exclusion in diverse contexts; such activities should be accessible to all young people and therefore be realized in those structures providing them free-time activities, such as youth clubs, youth centers, and community centers but also in schools and/or other educational institutions. In some countries, schools give the possibility to hold afternoon courses and workshops for the students, and these spaces can be used to implement activities targeting social inclusion.

c. To work on self-confidence of individuals belonging to marginalized groups

Marginalized groups as more vulnerable groups of people are more likely to develop emotional and psychological distress. When working with such groups it is very important that we continuously help them to build their self-esteem in order to support them developing a healthy picture of themselves. Self esteem is based on the perception that we create on ourselves, mainly affected by external factors like in this case social exclusion; it is our belief about how valuable, capable, appreciated we are as persons.
Often, the biggest challenge for youth workers/social workers is how to deal with the cultural and social situation of the children who were carrying cultural features of their home country and at the same time they were living in a reality where such features resulted in an obstacle to their integration. Sometimes, solution is found by drawing out of the context such cultural aspects and analyzing them in a way that children could understand the added value brought by their belonging to a culture different from the one they were currently living in (for example: knowing two languages from a very young age, being capable of looking at daily challenges from different points of view etc)

d. To support the usage of new media in order to create a common space between different groups in societies

It is important to continuously improve the way social exclusion is addressed and how the information is shared. New media are an example; such means of communication are important channels that can be used to reach more people and communities from different backgrounds. Also, their use can facilitate the exchange of perspectives and points of view in order to work towards a more inclusive society by creating safe spaces for sharing their experiences and thus learning from each other.

e. To promote activities that raise motivation and empower youngsters to take active participation in their society

Active youth participation is a key condition for ensuring and promoting greater levels of social inclusion of young people. For this reason, it is essential to raise awareness and knowledge about the activities carried on at local, national and international level by civil society organizations targeting young people. Both NGOs and the public sector (from public offices to schools, universities, libraries etc.) should be responsible for promoting such activities and providing information on volunteering opportunities.

f. To develop mechanisms and plans for the personal and professional development of members/volunteers of youth organizations and for their further involvement in policy making and/or civil society organizations

Young people involved in youth organizations are often willing to continue working in fields like policy making, international cooperation, HR management, etc. Therefore, we believe that it is important to develop a long term vision for the empowerment of current support systems for youth organizations and to increase the quality and accessibility of learning opportunities aiming at the personal and professional growth of young people involved in youth organizations. A necessary step for this development is the recognition of the impact of youth organizations on the social and personal development of the young people involved.
YEU has developed the "Qualification framework for the youth workers" which has offered two different levels of youth worker profile connected with the European Qualification Framework and European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training that enables youth workers to test their skills and capabilities and to obtain a diploma recognizing their skills and knowledge, no matter of their formal education vocation (if any)[8].

g. To inform young people about their rights and the opportunities that are given to them

Nowadays, more than any other time in history, youth are provided with sets of rights and opportunities that in most of the cases circulate among those young people that are already involved in programs and activities aiming at their inclusion, growth and development. We believe that in order to ensure greater levels of social inclusion it is vital to increase the number of young people that have access to information related to the schemes and programs designed for them.

Youth organizations are already playing an important role in sharing such information, and in our opinion it is essential that also authorities and institutions at local, national and international level engage in this process by being more supportive towards youth organizations and by increasing

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[8] http://youth-workers.eu/

their capacities to reach young people with information regarding the rights and opportunities that are given to them. One of the ways to achieve it is by establishing the partnerships between youth organizations and institutions providing services for young people (eg. job placement centres) in order to allow youth organizations to use institutional channels to share such information.

2. To improve the dialogue and the cooperation between stakeholders involved in the development and the implementation of actions targeting social inclusion (Local organizations, communities and authorities).

a. To be engaged in the dialogue with policy-makers and representatives of local authorities

Being recognized by the local authorities and having a good communication channel with them is fundamental for youth organizations to be well positioned and taken into consideration while asking for support or when advocating for young people's rights. According to this, we support the dialogue between youth organizations and local policy-makers as well as the creation of spaces enabling this dialogue, where absent, and the empowerment of the current communication practices.

Youth councils (especially those working on local level) are a good way for young people to get in touch with policy makers and build partnerships with governmental structures dealing with youth policy.

b. To ensure stable cooperation between local communities, youth organizations and local authorities.

Cooperation among stakeholders working on social inclusion is an effective way to elaborate actions that will address the issue in a more capillary way. For this reason, we believe that it is important to engage representatives of local authorities and diverse groups of volunteers to work together on developing projects aiming at improving the quality of life in local community (planting trees, art projects, development of project proposals for EU programs, etc.) and at providing spaces for dialogue with non-organized young people.

c. To improve the local community and build local partnership and joint projects

Local networks are an effective way that civil society organizations can use to develop joint projects or advocate for common objectives. They are also useful to organize projects that focus on the involvement of the local community and that give information about the different organizations and their scopes and activities.

Local networks are also a way to support the actions of the organizations not only by sharing expertise and knowledge but also by supporting the fundraising and the visibility of the organizations.

d. To promote bottom up problem debating and to offer space for youth to express their needs

One of the greatest needs of young people when it comes to their active participation is to have their opinion heard and valued. We consequently encourage the organization of workshops, round tables,

training courses, conferences, meetings and other possible moments for young people to meet policy makers and discuss youth-related topics as well as other issues concerning them and how their needs are met by the currently implemented youth policies.

e. To organize informal meetings between youth organizations and local/national authorities

Having the possibility to hold informal dialogues with representatives of the institutions can prove beneficial when advocating for obtaining funds, spaces and other kinds of support.

Relations can be enhanced by inviting members of local/national authorities at the initiatives organized by youth organizations like concerts, exhibitions, movie nights, sports events and other entertainment or educational activities is a good practice both to promote the organization and its values and to engage in dialogues in a more informal and youth-friendly context.

Conclusion

By organizing activities which set up an exchange of viewpoints and needs of different youngsters, youth organizations can facilitate the dialogue (between stakeholders) and the mutual understanding between them. As a result of this, a greater level of involvement of socially excluded youth will be achieved.

This policy paper recommends youth organizations to involve local/national authorities in their activities; in order to achieve Social Inclusion of the youngsters in the community life it is first of all very important that local youth organizations and local authorities cooperate together.

This cooperation is crucial as it also creates more opportunities to foster youth participation in social life, hence empowering the local communities and to bringing youth closer to the decision making processes. In order to improve the current situation where too often the flow of information between organized youth and local authorities is not satisfying, we encourage the dialogue by connecting youth organizations and local authorities in less formal settings.

To facilitate the relationship between local youth organizations and local authorities it necessary to open the space for dialogue between the two parties, and to be able to listen and understanding each other's needs. Also, the local development depends on the support (financial, infrastructure, basic services, technical advice) given by local authorities to improving socio-economic conditions of the population, and being engaged in the dialogue with decision-makers allows youth organizations to better strive for their goals and promote their suggestions.

Each local authority should create the bridge for communication with its citizens, and civil society organizations can not only be a fundamental pillar of this bridge but also a relevant stakeholder and partner in the development of projects targeting social exclusion. The establishment of a genuine and productive dialogue between local authorities and youth organizations is important for an effective work addressing youth, especially disadvantaged one, and the society in general.

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