



MLADINSKI
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Policy Paper

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

■ **Introduction**

ON YOUTH POLICIES

In the past few years, youth policy in Slovenia has entered the socio-political agenda, and has become increasingly important and taken into account. Since 2010 it is also defined in the Act on the Public Interest in the Youth Sector (ZJIMS)¹ as: “ /.../ a harmonised set of measures of various sectoral public policies with the purpose of promoting and facilitating the integration of youth in the economic, cultural and political life of the community and appropriate support mechanisms for developing youth work and operation of youth organisations, which is carried out in cooperation with autonomous and democratic representatives of youth organisations and professional and other organisations /.../«.

The National Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS), the umbrella organisation of national youth organisations and the key partner in the social dialogue in the field of youth, strives for the development of youth policies and, consequently, for the improvement of the situation of young people. With this in mind, MSS adopts policy documents tackling different sectoral policies, which call upon relevant stakeholders to implement the proposed actions. Such documents – the present one, tackling youth participation, being one of them – are a basis for MSS to, inter alia, enter into discussions with policy makers, to react to current affairs, to inform young people and the wider public and undertake other measures.

A definition of youth says that one is young until one has reached the desired points of growing up (has moved away from one’s parents, has created a family, has become employed, has finished schooling, etc.), and has thus become autonomous and independent. Youth policies intend to properly regulate these key transitions in the lives of individuals. Through policy papers, MSS wants to form these processes according to the views of young people.

POLICY PAPER »YOUTH PARTICIPATION«

Youth participation and the creation of conditions for it, are important challenges in democratic societies and are key requirements for the society to prosper and to develop in a sustainable way. Considering that it touches upon different areas, institutions and policies, youth participation cannot be regulated in one single place. It is about the principles of the functioning of the society and its institutions, which are difficult to change; therefore, to achieve youth participation will first require the raising of awareness among target public in several areas.

The aim of this policy paper is to define youth participation and its areas, to determine its meaning, to lay out problems and to propose measures that will improve youth participation and the conditions needed for it.

¹ *Act on the Public Interest in the Youth Sector (ZJIMS)*, Ur. l. RS št. 42/2010. Available (in Slovenian) at <http://www.uradni-list.si/1/content?id=97951> (19 August 2010).

DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

Participation, as discussed in this document, can generally be defined as active involvement of young people in decision making processes on any matter (also in the wider political space), which concerns the formation of the society we live in. Youth participation can take place in different organisations or institutions, project and informal groups, whereby youth organisations deserve a special mention. Young people are involved in decision making through different organisational forms either directly or indirectly. Indirect and direct participation can furthermore take place at the local, national or international levels.

For the purposes of this paper we particularly define the following:

(1) types of participation

- **Youth participation in public decision making.** This area includes participation in elections and all forms of including youth in the preparation and implementation of public policies at the local, national and international levels; it can take place directly (young people take part as individuals) or indirectly – through youth organisations and other structures. In this, young people may use different means or channels: various forms of public expression of opinion, publishing in mass media, petitions, fora, public panels, protests, participation in projects aimed at establishing direct dialogue between youth and policy makers, as well as inclusion in the legislative process by responding to policy makers' proposals and through participation in public debates, etc. We must not forget the outstanding importance of youth participation at elections, both as voters and as candidates for political positions.

- **Youth participation in youth organisations.** Through membership or participation in a youth organisation, young people co-decide on the programme, activities, positions and other youth organisation matters. This is first and foremost the space to learn about participation, which introduces young people to the partaking in democratic decision making, and this eases their involvement in the decision making of other institutions and in other areas.

- **Youth organisations' and other youth structures' participation in public decision making.** Youth organisations and youth representative bodies can take part in public decision making in different ways. One of the key purposes of youth councils is precisely participation – local youth councils represent youth towards local decision makers, the National Youth Council does so towards national decision makers. At the European level, this is the role of the European Youth Forum, which cooperates with the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

Various bodies and organs exist within public institutions, which are composed by representatives of youth organisations and authorities, and whose purpose may be mutual information sharing, consultation and development of public policy recommendations, but can also be co-decision making on youth-related matters. At the national level the governmental Council for Youth serves to share information,

consult and prepare proposals and recommendations to ministries that concern young people; there are also specialised bodies, such as the governmental Council for Student Matters, which supports the government in the decision making with regard to students and in which representatives of student councils and the Student Organisation of Slovenia take part.

The local level also knows certain similar bodies. The local community normally uses the mechanism of youth committees or commissions on youth matters within municipality councils; in some cases the local youth council plays the consultative role in the local decision making process.

At the international level the Council of Europe has such bodies in place. The so-called Advisory Council on Youth is composed of 30 representatives of youth organisations and networks, who prepare opinions on current matters in the youth sector. The Advisory Council takes part in the so-called Joint Council on Youth, bringing together representatives of youth organisations and networks and representatives of Member States of the Council of Europe, and which takes decisions on the priorities, goals and budgets in the youth sector.

- **Structured dialogue** is an open, transparent, long-term, continuous and systematic dialogue between young people and authorities at the European, national and local levels.² Structured dialogue may take place at the initiative of authorities, youth or both.

- **Youth participation within the formal education systems.** The basis for pupil and school student participation in elementary and high schools is set in the form of class meetings and class representatives, who should take part in decision making at higher levels. Certain high schools have their own democratically organised student communities, which are represented in the School Student Union of Slovenia.³ It functions in the framework on the Student Organisation of Slovenia.⁴ At faculties and universities student councils are set up for the purpose of co-decision, they both function as organs of the faculty or university, and the framework for their work is set by universities.

² This is the formulation of structured dialogue in the Act on the public interest in the youth sector, without mentioning the international level.

³ The School Student Union of Slovenia (DOS) associates school students in Slovenia and brings together all Slovenian school students, represents their interests and strives for their realisation. The legal basis is provided by the Student Organisation of Slovenia. Available at: www.dijaska.org (15 September 2011).

⁴ The Student Organisation of Slovenia (ŠOS) is the umbrella organisation of students in Slovenia, within which several organisational forms exist: university student organisations, local student organisations (student clubs) and independent undergraduate institutions' student organisations. Available (in Slovenian) at: www.studentska-org.si (15 September 2011). This does not mean that students participate within the faculties but that they organise themselves independently. MSS considers them as youth structures but not youth organisations because university student organisations do not have voluntary membership. Part of the ŠOS' structure – local student organisations i.e. student clubs – count as youth organisations, because they are established under The Societies' Act.

(2) forms of participation:

In public decision making, in education institutions and other forms of youth cooperation with decision makers we can distinguish between different forms or **levels of participation according to inclusion of youth in them**⁵, that is:

1. **determination and information.** Adults determine a role for young people in the project, and inform them of the reasons and forms of inclusion in the project and about their role in it. This is the first level at which we can speak about youth participation.
2. **Consultation and information.** At this level adults conceive and run the project, while young people advise them, whilst being aware of the way their opinion will be taken into account in adults' decision making.
3. **Shared decisions in adult projects.** Adults take initiative for projects or programmes, but the decision making process is shared with youth. Youth must know how and why every decision they take part in or take themselves, will be implemented.
4. **Young people direct their own projects.** At this level young people take initiative in projects or programmes and run them themselves, whilst adults support them when needed.
5. **Shared decisions in youth projects.** At this level projects and programmes are youth ideas, but the decision making process is shared between youth and adults. Such projects empower young people and enable them to access the experience and knowledge of older people.

(3) actors in the field of participation:

Young people are adolescents and young adults of both genders, from 15 to 29 years of age.⁶

Youth organisation is an autonomous, democratic, voluntary association of young people, which through its functioning enables young people to create planned and unplanned learning experience, to formulate and express their opinions and to exercise activities according to their interest, cultural, principled and political orientation. Depending on the level of functioning youth organisations can be either national or local.⁷

Youth organisations may be independent legal persons or may work independently within larger non-youth membership-based organisations. The latter exist in

⁵ Adapted after the model of Roger Hart (source: Beočanin, Tadej in ostali. 2010. Mladi in občina, sodelovanje generacij. Ljubljana, Ajdovščina: Mladinski svet Ljubljana, Mladinski svet Ajdovščina). The model includes three other levels at the beginning of the ladder (level 1: manipulation of youth, level 2: youth as decoration, level 3: symbolic cooperation with youth), which do not yet stand for participation, i.e. are not participatory and therefore their description is excluded from the policy paper.

⁶ *Act on the Public Interest in the Youth Sector (ZJIMS)*, Ur. l. RS št. 42/2010. Available (in Slovenian) at <http://www.uradni-list.si/1/content?id=97951> (13 September 2011).

⁷ Mladinski svet Slovenije. 2010. Policy Paper on Youth Association of National Youth Council of Slovenia. Available (in Slovenian) at: <http://www.avtonomen.si/participacija/>.

Slovenia in the context of political parties (so-called youth wings), but to a lesser extent in other membership-based organisations (trade unions and non-youth associations), which is understandable, since they have only been recognised as youth organisations by the Act on the Public Interest in the Youth Sector from 2010.

Youth council is an umbrella association of youth organisations, representing the interests of young people and youth organisations. The youth council may function at the national level (National Youth Council of Slovenia) or at the local level– as the local youth council. Youth councils are established and function in line with the Youth Councils Act.⁸

The Act, *inter alia*, requires from representatives of authorities to inform youth councils before preparing draft regulations affecting young people; local authorities shall inform local youth councils, national authorities shall inform the National Youth Council of Slovenia.⁹

Policy makers are representatives of public institutions which have the power of decision making in the legislative or executive power, and which may act at the local or national levels. These are mayors, local councillors and municipality management as well as Members of the Parliament, the government and leadership of other governmental structures. When speaking about **decision makers** in general, we can also include the leadership of other public institutions and those private institutions that exercise public service.

⁸ The Youth Councils Act (ZMS), Ur. l. RS št. 70/2000. Available (in Slovenian) at <http://www.uradni-list.si/1/objava.jsp?urlid=200070&stevilka=3305> (27 August 2011).

⁹ See footnote 6.

■ *The meaning of youth participation*

1. Youth participation increases the success of reaching autonomy and the quality of living in the society and managing it.

The participation of individuals in the life of the society plays a key role in the development of democracy, which requires the inclusion of as many people, organisations and social groups as possible. In this regard, young people are particularly important as they gradually take on more and more roles and responsibilities in life, and are in the process of learning about democracy. Youth participation in the institutions and processes which directly or indirectly impact their lives, serves to set up an environment in which young people are able to **take responsibility for their own future and for the future of the society**, which critically supports them in reaching autonomy. A young individual taking part in such decision making develops a sense of ownership over those decisions and this positively affects her/his self-image as a capable and active person, strengthens her/his sense of responsibility for decisions and motivates her/him to further contribute to the development of the society. Youth participation also ensures better implementation and more suitable decisions, because young people do not only take part in the decision making process but are also the ones most affected by their impact.

Young people must have a say in decision making. Youth participation in institutions and processes helps set up an environment, in which young people can take responsibility for their own future and the future of the society, which also helps them reach autonomy.

Young people must have a say in decision making. Supporting participation and motivating for it help ensure young people's inclusion in decision making also later in life, and help prevent alienation¹⁰ and risk of social exclusion. On the other hand, distance from power centres, economic weakness and constant subordination may lead to apathy, irresponsible behaviour and destructive responses to current affairs in young people, which does not contribute to young individuals' personal development nor to the society as the user of the working, learning and development potential of youth. The importance of the local level merits special mention in this sense, as the decision making processes are less complex there than at higher levels, and as this is where certain less demanding and more concrete decisions are taken. Local and regional authorities are closest to youth; therefore, participation at this level carries a significant potential for mobilisation.¹¹

¹⁰ Adapted after: European Youth Forum. 2006. Policy Paper on Social Inclusion through Youth Participation. Available at: http://www.youthforum.org/images/stories/Documents/Employment_and_Social_Affairs/0070-06FINAL.pdf (29 August 2011)

¹¹ Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe. 2003. Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. Available at:

2. Youth participation strengthens democracy in the society.

Through participation young people **learn about democracy**, that is about how current political systems function, and they gain skills necessary for democracy to work, such as reaching agreement, negotiating, lobbying, etc. By taking part in decision making processes during childhood and early youth young people get an idea about how public (political) decision making happens and can understand it more easily. Participation is also a basis for the development of competences and values in constructing interpersonal relations, taking part in the community, intergenerational cooperation, dialogue and respect for the rule of law and human rights.

Therefore, **youth organisations are crucial** for participation, as they are by default in place for this purpose and represent a **learning space** where young people learn about and use democratic decision making processes. **Youth participation in the formal education system** is just as important (starting in elementary school), because the easiest way for youth to get used to taking decisions is in an environment, in which they live and function directly.

3. Young people gain competences through participation.

Participation brings many positive consequences. It is a legitimate way to develop knowledge about social affairs and to gain competences that young people who do not take an active part in the society, cannot obtain elsewhere; it is also a way to obtain reliable information in order to act to improve the community. Participation can enable young people to exercise their political rights and to take part in the democratisation of knowledge (young people obtain knowledge from daily experience and from people who are under-represented in the society, and in this way acquire knowledge needed for competent citizenship). It prepares young people to actively participate in the society (public engagement stimulates them to reflect on the sources of problems, and encourages them to act in the civil society). Participation also strengthens organisational skills and the capacity to respond to societal problems swiftly. The individual becomes an independent and responsible citizen, who takes responsibility for her/his actions and decisions. Participation, in many ways, supports the social development of youth, namely, by accelerating individual inclusion and development of youth organisations, and strengthens the capacity to bring change to the community.¹²

Through participation young people also learn about democracy and gain competences.

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Coe_youth/Participation/COE_charter_participation_en.pdf (28 August 2011).

¹² Adapted after: Kuhar, Metka. 2009. Prostočasne (in) participatorne dejavnosti mladih. Available (in Slovenian) at: <http://www.mladinski-delavec.si> (17 November 2011).

Citizenship-related competences gained by youth through the participatory process or through active engagement in the community, partly correspond with general social competences for effective engagement in interpersonal relations. These are: communication and organisation skills, skills related to the resolution of social conflicts, the capacity to take on a social perspective, interpersonal understanding, goal setting, decision making, strategic planning, self-confidence, interest in others... Partly, however, citizenship-related competences are specific and relate to social responsibility, social knowledge and opinions, social values and competences and skills of taking part in group work and in solving complex societal problems, such as analysis, evaluation, reflection, drawing conclusions on political and societal problems and questions.¹³

By learning about democratic decision making processes, participation enables young people to obtain important competences and is thus irreplaceable as a learning experience in the process of socialisation on the way to autonomy.

4. Young people have the right to participate.

The right to participation is determined in legal documents (e.g. the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, national constitutions) by a set of individual rights, such as the right to take part in public affairs, the freedom of thought and expression, the right to association. Youth participation was established as one of four key EU priorities in the field of active citizenship of youth by the White Paper on Youth from 2001, and was also emphasised in the EU Strategy on Youth in 2009. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe has put forward the relevance of local and regional participation in its Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.

Setting conditions to enable youth participation is key for the progress of the society – next to their intellectual input young people bring in a unique viewpoint of decisions.

Full and effective youth participation in the life of the society and in decision making is one of the ten priorities of the World Programme of Action for Youth (2010), which emphasises that setting conditions that enable youth participation is fundamental for the progress of the society – in addition to their intellectual input youth brings in a unique viewpoint of decisions. The programme particularly emphasises the role of youth organisations in the development of skills for efficient youth participation.¹⁴

In Slovenia too, youth participation has become one of the priorities; the Act on the Public Interest in the Youth Sector (2010) lists youth participation in the management of public affairs as one of nine content areas in the youth sector. A more concrete impetus for youth participation is included in the Youth Councils Act

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ United Nations. 2010. The World Programme of Action for Youth. Available at: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpay2010.pdf> (28 August 2011)

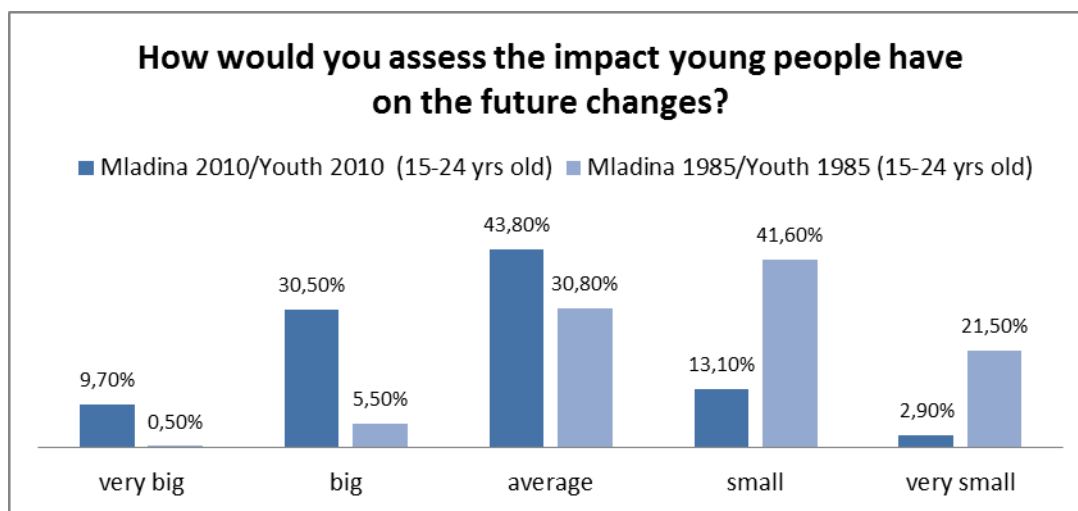
(2000), according to which decision makers shall inform youth councils about regulations that have a direct impact on the life and work of young people, and the establishment of the governmental Council for Youth (2009) – this is an advisory body that supports the government in the decision making in the field of youth and in which representatives of youth structures have half (ten) seats. Some local communities have lately also began to understand the relevance of engaging young people in their structures and policies. Therefore, young people have in some instances been invited to take part in different commissions, committees or similar bodies, which work on areas related to youth.

■ **Key challenges for youth participation in Slovenia**

Compared to other western European democracies (conventional political) youth participation in Slovenia is very weak. The research »Youth 2010«¹⁵ has found that (conventional political) participation is of less interest to youth here than it is to their peers in the EU and that young people in Slovenia have a particularly negative attitude towards representatives of authorities and towards public policies. Youth participation in political parties is below 2%, which is lower than the EU average. Young people are more interested in so-called unconventional¹⁶ forms of political participation, such as protests and various types of online participation. The research has also shown that 44,4 % of students are willing to take part in action for social change, which is around 4 % less than in 1995, and that 27 % of students are willing to engage only in actions demanding the change of the social status of youth, which is 10 % more than in 1995.

In Slovenia conventional political youth participation is very weak, but the awareness of the impact young people have on social change has grown in the last twenty years: from 5 % in 1985 to 40 % in 2010.

Graph: Perceived internal political competence¹⁷



¹⁵ Ministry of Education and Sport, Office for Youth. 2010. Mladina 2010, končno poročilo o rezultatih raziskave. Available (in Slovenian) at:

http://www.mss.gov.si/fileadmin/mss.gov.si/pageuploads/novice/Tiskovka/Mladina_2010_Koncno_porocilo.pdf (26 August 2011).

¹⁶ In the academic circles the term unconventional political participation is used for different forms of protest, occupation of buildings, signing of petitions, writing of letters to the editor, etc; conventional political participation stands for forms of engagement in decision making through legal channels, that is mostly through political parties, lists and elections.

¹⁷ Fištravec, Andrej. 2011. 25 let participacije slovenske mladine. Gradivo za konferenco. Nenavadna konferenca – Aktiven državljan: Slovenija po meri mladih, 10. november 2011. Maribor.

In general, youth awareness of the impact they have on social change has considerably grown in the past 20 years – from 5 % in 1985 to 40 % in 2010. Therefore, young people need to have several different channels at their disposal, enabling larger and more active participation in social change and in decision making processes.

Youth participation in the civil society and their engagement in volunteering for the benefit of the community is more recurrent in Slovenia than political participation, but still remains limited. In terms of youth membership of voluntary organisations, sports and recreation associations come first (35,7 %), followed by education and culture (19,8%); work with young people, mainly in youth organisations, comes third with 10,7 %. Low youth participation in trade unions – 6 % - which is within the EU average, and in political parties -2% - which is under the EU average, merit special mention.

Among problematic issues related to low youth participation one can identify:

- The lack of motivation for all forms of participation,
- Society's disinclination towards taking positions, ideologies and certain public forms of organisation,
- Lack of consideration for the voice of youth in (public) decision making,
- Low youth participation at the local level,
- Non-awareness and low level of information about the possibilities to participate,
- Lack of understanding and awareness among decision makers about the relevance of youth participation in youth organisations,
- Too little youth participation in decision making processes in the formal education system

Lack of motivation for all forms of participation or youth apathy is a key problem in youth participation. We can find its reasons in the attitude of decision makers to youth participation (see the point on non-awareness on the relevance of participation) and in the characteristics of the current lifestyle of youth:

- due to the so-called prolonged childhood it takes longer for young people to take responsibilities in all matters of life and to become independent;
- young people take preference in fast and visible impacts or change, which are not characteristic for many forms of participation (e.g. taking part in elections, contributing to the legislation development, negotiations between youth organisations and decision makers);
- young people or their groups become increasingly alienated and self-sufficient and see no opportunities in connecting with others;
- young people are very prone to consumerism

The lack of motivation for all forms of participation or youth apathy, and the society's aversion to taking a stand, to ideologies and to certain forms of organisation, are among key problems in youth participation.

and prefer to react to developments rather than to take part in their creation; similar goes for the youth sphere: young people prefer to be participants in already planned events rather than to contribute to their content and decision making on them.

This state is not the responsibility of youth as such, since their attitude to participation reflects today's society; it is influenced by the lack of consideration for youth by decision makers and society in general.

Local communities do not provide opportunities for youth, which would attract them to return to their local environment

Society's disinclination towards taking positions, ideologies and certain public forms of organisation is another important obstacle for youth participation. Here below we put forward certain most frequent **social prejudice** we have noticed in this area:

- if an individual is member of an organisation or movement, s/he agrees with every opinion and decision taken by its membership, s/he supports all (visible) people in the organisation in the professional, political and private sense, and s/he can therefore be assessed through any act, opinion or decision of these other people;
- if an individual belongs to or supports an ideology, s/he acts or wishes to act to the detriment of all other ideologies;
- if an individual is included in a political party or some other forms of organisation, s/he does so because of her/his personal ambition and material benefits;
- conflicts and disagreements, as well as compromise, are always negative.

There is a **lack of consideration for the voice of youth in (public) decision making**. Young people nowadays feel invisible and not taken into account because all they are expected to do is accept the given conditions, use available opportunities, educate themselves, etc., but not to be involved in decision making. This incapacity to impact decision making and the patronising attitude of institutions frequently diminish the motivation of young people to participate. Youth participation is often not in the interest of authorities, it is considered to be an obstacle rather than a contribution to better quality of the work of authorities. Perhaps the lack of consideration for youth is also affected by their low participation in elections – for this reason political parties, lists and candidates address youth as a target public less often. The government's Council for Youth is a good example of inefficient youth participation at the national level; as a joint youth and authorities' body it has too little political power, covers a rather general level of the youth sector and is not appropriate to handle specific matters.

Manipulation of youth can sometimes be a hidden tool decision makers use to reach their goals, as they address youth to gain support. Young people often succumb to such acts, because they lack a proper understanding of the question or problem at hand, and in elections or referenda unknowingly vote against beneficial change and decisions. In this way they contribute to decision making or change, which are harmful for them.

Low youth participation at the local level is particularly problematic because of the decisive importance of youth participation there. We face the arbitrariness of decision makers and mayors, who to a large extent take their own decisions about the inclusion of youth in decision making. Local youth councils exist in around 40 municipalities, around 20 among them are active, and even fewer cooperate with municipal authorities in decision making. Local decision makers usually do not adhere even to the clause of the Youth Councils Act, which requires them to inform the youth council about those adopted regulations that affect youth. Low youth participation is affected also by the fact that a large part of young people are in education in university centres outside their place of permanent residence, and therefore have difficulties in being active at the local level. Local communities, for their part, do not offer the opportunities that would attract young people to return to their local environment.

Non-awareness and low level of information about the possibilities to participate are additional key obstacles for participation in youth organisations and for youth participation in general.

Non-awareness can in the widest sense be attributed to the state and the society, in which low youth participation is particularly affected by a lack of understanding by the representatives of authorities, parents, educators and youth organisations themselves. Young people do not even obtain information about the existence of youth organisations and other forms of participation, and thus do not know the advantages of such participation. It is

Young people are unaware of the options for participation and are not well informed about them.

important to emphasise that schools have a weak link with the youth sector, although such links would be easiest ways of strengthening the awareness of the importance and opportunities for youth participation. Youth organisations and their leaders must first and foremost themselves understand that their purpose is to teach participation and active citizenship to youth, and must promote it with target audiences.

One must emphasise **the lack of understanding and awareness among decision makers about the relevance of youth participation in youth organisations**

and their relevance to the development of democracy and active citizenship. Weak financial and other support to youth organisations – which have a weak

Youth organisations have a weak infrastructure and suffer from lack of staff.

infrastructure, lack staff, have low mobilisation and promotional capacity and lack the opportunities to cooperate with decision makers – is a consequence of that. All this is reflected in low youth participation, creating a vicious circle.

There is **too little youth participation in decision making processes in the formal education system**. The basic conditions to develop participation for the

pupil and school student communities and parliaments in elementary and high schools exist, but this system is not defined in the legislation (pupil communities are only given a mention), is underdeveloped or left to the discretion of individual schools. Participation in student councils is more institutionalised (in the Acts of universities) but also remains low and does not guarantee student representativity. The options for students and pupils to co-develop education processes and programmes are thus weak, whilst educators are mostly not trained properly to support youth participation. Due to a weak link between formal education institutions and the non-governmental or youth sector, there is no flow of knowledge about learning to participate and about practicing participation. Child and school student parliaments, addressing current affairs, may be beneficial, but they do not co-decide on matters affecting these students but mostly allow only for discussion and exchange of opinions.

■ Recommendations

Foundations for learning to participate and raising youth participation as identified in this policy paper must urgently be improved. The National Youth Council of Slovenia strives for the implementation of a range of measures through the state, formal education institutions and employers – all these are the key agents of change in the area.

- 1. We call upon formal and non-formal education providers to reinforce the systematic building of a culture of participation.** Starting in childhood young people need to be included in decision making about the environment they live in, and be taught how to responsibly participate in democratic processes; formal education institutions play a crucial role in this.
- 2. We suggest to ministry responsible for education to include the following among fundamental tasks in elementary and high schools (in the education legislation under the goals of education and upbringing):**
 - encouraging democratic processes in the context of pupil or school student community and their cooperation in decision making on school matters, and
 - regular cooperation between schools and organisations in the youth sector, with the purpose of informing about the possibilities of youth participation.

Starting in childhood, young people need to be included in decision making about their environment and taught to responsibly participate in democratic processes.

We therefore call upon all elementary and high schools to set up **democratically organised pupil/student communities** or to enhance their work. According to their age and capacity, the areas in which pupils/students will express opinions and give proposals to educators, or take independent decisions on, must be established. It is important to not only enable principled discussions on values,¹⁸ but to enable decisions which have a direct impact on pupils/students; their sense of responsibility will develop much better if they can feel the consequences of their decisions, and if decisions also bring them duties.

- 3. We propose to political decision makers and to elementary and high schools to include education and information about the functioning of the public sector, and especially about the opportunities to influence it** in formal education processes; in this sense all levels need to be included – the local, national and international. Young people need to be continuously and in line with their age, informed about all options and forms of participation, which they can use in life; this ranges from individual participation, civil society, political parties, to trade unions, etc. Such content must also be part of the

¹⁸ This is the role of the child parliament programme (see: <http://www.zpms.si/programi/otroski-parlament/>).

school subject addressing citizenship education. Adequate training of educators leading these processes is needed, and if required, cooperation with external experts should be in place.

4. **Universities must strengthen student participation in university education** as well as the level of democracy in co-decision processes with students. Representativity of student councils must be increased through their democratic formation and functioning, and through higher transparency of the student representatives' work. All students need to receive adequate information, regular meetings need to be held, students' involvement in student councils must be encouraged, and there must be a possibility for them to tackle topics they find relevant and to influence education processes in the context of universities and their members. Therefore, the founding acts of universities and their members need to be complemented with adequate provisions.

5. We call upon political decision makers at the local, national and international level to **significantly strengthen the structured dialogue**, i.e. dialogue with youth, and to ensure that it will not amount only to one-sided information provided to youth, but that youth will respond and react. Young people need to be encouraged to dialogue without a patronising attitude, in a youth-friendly and understandable way, and be given the opportunity to start the dialogue at their own initiative. Decision makers should adhere to the principle of inclusion of **youth participation in all areas affecting youth**, such as education, employment, housing, social protection, family policy, non-governmental organisations, volunteering, mobility, environment and health. Wherever possible, youth representatives must be involved in working groups preparing the legislation or acts and measures that have an impact on youth.

Political decision makers must strengthen the structured dialogue, which shall not mean one-way information to young people, but shall ensure they can respond and react to them.

6. We call upon the Office for Youth and upon local communities to ensure **adequate financial, administrative and infrastructure support** to youth organisations, so that they can provide quality in implementing their tasks in the field of youth participation. It is to be understood that the basic aim of youth organisations is precisely the participation and democratic decision making and learning about both, and is not necessarily about the result this process brings; the path is more important than the goal. Youth organisations need adequate infrastructure, administrative support and other staff, the majority of whom are volunteers; however, such activity is difficult to implement exclusively through volunteer work. We therefore propose that the **means for the functioning of youth organisations** at the local and national level are separated from project activities; by the former we mean the financing of democratic processes in the organisation, such as statutory

activities (councils of members) and other forms of including the members in the leadership of organisations to promote youth participation – particularly for the cooperation with formal education institutions and for the participation in structured dialogue at the local, national and international levels.

7. We call upon local communities to set up adequate youth participation structures to enable involvement in the elaboration of local public policies. Depending on the municipality one or more of the following mechanisms can be used: a youth committee in the municipal council, a commission for youth matters in the municipal council, consultation with the local youth council or consultation with local youth organisations.

We call upon decision makers to amend article 6 of the Youth Councils Act, so that the state and local communities are obliged to receive an opinion of youth councils before adopting measures affecting youth.

8. We call upon **local communities** to encourage the establishment, functioning and quality of youth participation in youth councils, and to implement and enhance the rules stipulating obligatory information provision to youth councils. At the same time we invite decision makers – **ministry responsible for youth** to prepare, and the **Parliament** to adopt – an amendment to article 6 of the Youth Councils Act, which requires decision makers to inform youth councils; the amendment should request that the state and local authorities **must obtain an opinion from the youth councils before adopting measures** affecting youth, so that structured dialogue can genuinely take off, as stipulated in the Act on the Public Interest in the Youth Sector.

All ministries working in areas affecting the life and work of youth, must ensure the involvement of young people in policy making.

Where no youth councils exist, local communities shall find an adequate formula to set up a representative youth body, which could represent youth in structured dialogue; this shall be done based on a proposal of youth organisations and if needed, in cooperation with the National Youth Council of Slovenia.

9. We propose to the government's **Council for Youth** to enhance its work with working groups on individual areas, and to ensure wider and larger inclusion of youth representatives in the work of ministries whenever these work on youth-related policies.

10. **All ministries tackling areas that affect the life and work of youth** must ensure the participation of young people in the formulation of policies. Several options exist for this, such as

- regular inclusion of youth representatives in bodies drafting regulations or policies;
- the establishment of a specific body consisting of representatives of youth and of the ministry;
- the setup and specificities of such cooperation should be consulted with the government Council for Youth.

11. We invite **political decision makers at the national and local level** to promote, inform and raise awareness about youth participation, particularly by ensuring adequate financial, infrastructure and expert support to youth organisations and other youth structures. The promotion of participation must reach different target groups: youth, parents, educators and decision makers. Certainly, as a precondition, youth organisations must be aware of the importance of youth participation and of their own activity for the development of democracy and active citizenship of youth.

Formal education institutions must, within formal education processes, provide the promotion, information and awareness raising about youth participation.

12. We call upon **formal education institutions** to promote, inform and raise awareness about youth participation, within formal education processes. Formal education institutions must ensure the cooperation with youth organisations when implementing their programmes. Youth organisations must have secured conditions to continually cooperate with schools, which will help schools to ensure youth-friendly and interesting presentations of participation, which will also enable practical involvement in activities.

13. We call upon **youth organisations** to ensure **quality participation processes** internally, and to enable progress, education and new challenges for its members, to encourage transfer of experience from more to less experienced members, and to build a sense of belonging among members. Youth organisations must also ensure the highest possible involvement of members in decision making, and must work as transparently as possible and ensure their work is representative. The same goes for **local youth councils**.

We call upon youth organisations to ensure quality in internal participatory processes and to enable progress and learning.

14. We call upon all **non-youth membership-based organisations** (associations, trade unions and political parties), who also have young members, to internally enable and encourage autonomous youth organisation processes and provide them with the possibility to carry out quality democratic processes and to learn to participate.

- 15.** We call upon local authorities to put in place the infrastructure and finances to set up platforms, which will enable higher youth participation, such as enabling the use of information and communication technologies, e-voting, voting with mobile phones...

■ **Conclusion**

Holistic regulation of the youth participation policy in Slovenia is a necessary step towards youth autonomy and towards young people's active participation in society; consequently, this will lead to sustainable development of the society.

Young people are often the most ignored part of the society, often believed not to require special measures. Such attitudes are wrong, particularly due to the importance of life transitions that take place precisely in youth. If we thus desire a healthy, coherent and connected society, with a perspective for the future and as a space where people live happily and productively, youth need to be given proper care – and this needs to be done together with young people.

The National Youth Council of Slovenia strives for the cooperation of all social actors in this process, all those who can in a way contribute to improving the existing circumstances and conditions. We strive to develop a long-term and coherent policy in line with the needs of youth and supporting their integration in the labour market and motivating them for lifelong learning. This is how we can make an important impact on the quality of life in Slovenia and on the future of our society.