
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH – A REMEDI AGAINST MARGINALISATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Europaisches Zentrum

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**Research Director /
Co-ordinator** Prof. Dr. Bernd Marin, born in Vienna in 1948, is Executive Director of the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, affiliated to the United Nations in Vienna since 1988. From 1984 to 1988 he was Professor of Comparative Political and Social Research at the European University Institute (the European Communities' international university) in Florence, where he was also Head of the Department of Political and Social Sciences (1986 - 1987).

Key words

- Youth policies.
- Politics.
- Participatory project
- Youth-Organization
- Youth council
- Decision- making

Research subject

Political participation of youth may be instrumental in overcoming increasing generational tensions and contradictions. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1989, was an important step in promoting the idea of participation of children and young people. In the following years, this topic was taken up by the Council of Europe in the framework of different international projects. In addition, the Council and the Ministers of Youth of the European Union adopted a resolution on youth participation under the Austrian presidency in 1998.

Partially as a result of these initiatives, many European countries have been promoting political participation of young people below voting age over the past decade. However, it is difficult to obtain an overview of the ongoing developments due to the lack of documentation of this relatively new field. To compensate for this lack, the international research project "Political Participation of Youth below Voting age" aimed to analyse the situation in different European member states.

Abstract

Many European countries have been promoting political participation of young people below voting age over the past decade. However, it is difficult to achieve an overview of the ongoing developments in the different countries since there is little documentation on this rather new topic. This research project was carried out to offset this lack of information and aimed to study the situation in different European countries (Austria, Finland, Italy, Sweden, UK). The study was carried out by an international research team and coordinated by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research.

The study provides a brief overview of developments on an international level. Here particular reference is made to the importance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and to relevant opinions of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. Furthermore, current developments in Austria, Finland, Italy, Sweden, and the United Kingdom were described and analysed. Finally a typology of the political participation of youth is developed based on the national reports and the results of a conference of 22 experts representing 13 countries. The objective of this typology was to systematise the experiences gleaned up until this point and to create a firmer basis for future theoretical work on the political participation of youth below voting age.

Research Objectives

One main objective of this study was to foster international exchange of experiences in the field of political participation of youth below voting age, since there has not yet been very much co-operation on this research topic.

In addition, other main aims and goals of the research project on political participation below voting age are the following:

- Promoting political participation of youth below voting age as a strategy for strengthening social integration and combating marginalisation and social exclusion
- Furthering intergenerational solidarity and creating the foundations for a new generation contract
- Collecting information on existing participation projects in five European countries, namely Austria, Finland, Italy, the United Kingdom and Sweden.
- International comparison of ongoing experiences and elaboration of a typology of participation projects
- Evaluating Austrian experiences and developing guidelines and orientations for successful models
- Dissemination of results with a view to future projects and extension of the study to Central-Eastern European countries

Methodology

A. Analysis of recent developments concerning youth's share of political decision-making:

- Desk-research

B. Overview of already existing projects in the participating countries:

- Development of a questionnaire that allows statistical analysis of already existing projects in cooperation between Austria, Finland and Italy
- National implementation of the survey in Austria, Finland and Italy, the questionnaire is sent by mail to youth groups and organisations working on youth
- Statistical analysis of the data and interpretation at national level in each of the participating countries
- National reports on the results of the surveys by each of the participating countries
- Additional national reports by experts of the United Kingdom and Sweden.

C. Selective evaluation of youth participation projects in Austria:

- Interviews with participating youngsters and adult helpers
- Questionnaire on the impact of participation
- Workshop with youngsters (in order to develop perspectives of political participation)

D. International comparison and elaboration of a typology of participation projects

- Cross-national analysis of the national reports

E. Dissemination and discussion of results

- International expert meeting with 15 European experts
- Publication of the Final Report

Main Research Results

The present discussion on the participation of children and young people focuses on the identification of a politically marginalised population group whose interests have not been considered adequately in the past. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the United Nations in November 1989, can be seen as the main trigger and contextual factor for new participation projects over the past decade. In this connection, it is not surprising that political participation of youth below voting age was not so much a movement of young people themselves as an initiative of adults for youth.

The study provides a short overview of the developments at international level. Here particular reference is made to the importance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and relevant statements from the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. Furthermore, current developments in Austria, Finland, Italy, Sweden, and the United Kingdom are described and analysed. The heterogeneity of the five national reports suggests that we are concerned here with an extremely new field of research that will not be able to rely on established definitions and existing preliminary studies. In any case, the analyses clearly reveal that forms of political participation of youth below voting age do exist in all of the countries included in this study, although in terms of conditions and extent there is a relatively high level of variation. In the last chapter, the five country reports and the results of an expert meeting with participants from 13 different countries are used to elaborate a typology of participation projects.

With regard to the ways in which young people below voting age can participate, four different models can be identified (based on national reports and the international expert meeting):

- Direct integration of young people in political participation processes
- Associative initiatives: e.g., youth organisations or youth centres
- Action oriented participation: from collecting signatures to civil disobedience
- Ombudswork for children, carried out by adult professionals.

The objective of drawing up this typology was to systematise the experiences gleaned up till then and to create a firmer basis for future theoretical work on the political participation of youth below voting age.

Conclusions

The wide variety of forms of participation presently existing is essential if we are to reach as many different young people as possible, and should therefore be further promoted. Special support should be given to action oriented participation of youth, not only because this form of participation has often been overlooked in the past but also because it is the

most likely to be initiated and implemented by children or young people themselves. Finally, it must be pointed out that political participation of youth cannot serve as an excuse for a reduction of efforts of governments and municipalities in the area of conventional policies for young people. It can supplement but never replace traditional youth politics.

Main contributions of the project to the objectives of the YFE Programme

Better knowledge of political participation of youth: international data that can be used as a basis for future research; the evaluation of Austrian participation models provides some early clues about the impact and meaning of political participation of youngsters and permits some recommendations for further initiatives in this area

- Distribution of information and promotion of the idea of political participation of youth (via publications, lectures, the Internet, etc.)
- Awareness-raising among key-persons and institutions engaged in youth work, and also policy-makers at national, regional and local levels, regarding political participation
- Identification of successful models for the realisation of future projects
- Promotion of participation of youngsters in youth policy at local, regional, national and international levels
- Initiation of a discussion on legislative changes to extend the possibilities and secure the quality of political participation of young people