UP2YOUTH

newsletter 02/2009

Youth - actor of social change

Young people's participation as agency in social change

This issue of the UP2YOUTH newsletter deals with the relation between participation, young people's agency and social change. Presenting the findings of the thematic working on youth participation within the framework of UP2YOUTH, it concludes a series of monothematic issues in which already young people's transitions into parenthood (newsletter 2/08) and transitions to work of ethnic minority youth (newsletter 1/09) have been addressed. According to the overall objective of UP2YOUTH, a primary concern are changes in the meaning and the forms of participation which result from the interaction between social change and young people's agency. It also reflects on the conditions policies may create in order to empower young people's participatory action and involvement.

The thematic working group on youth participation involved teams from Austria, Ireland, Italy, France and Slovakia. The working process consisted in the production of national reports, exchanges with practitioners, policy makers and researchers during two thematic workshops. Further local case studies on youth policies and participation in medium-sized cities as well as on selected counter cultures were produced. On this basis, a selection of emerging issues were identified and analysed in-depth: the changing meaning of participation, youth cultures (especially counter cultures), participation in the Internet, local dimensions of youth policy, participation and learning with a focus on participation in school. This process is documented in a thematic report (see www.up2youth.org/downloads).

Participation and agency

The relationship between young people's agency and social change appears to be crucial for the analysis of participation inasmuch as the latter is widely seen as the prime mode of active citizenship in late modern democracies in which relationships between individual and collective perspectives are diverging. This perspective therefore is also relevant for assessing the potential influence and limitations of participation programmes, both on the biographies of the individuals and on the processes of policy making at all levels (from the local to the European level), as well as the key factors that make participation effective.

In the UP2YOUTH working group on participation agency has been understood as the ability of individuals to act intentionally and meaningfully in the sense that every single action they undertake is at the same time an attempt at constructing one's own life as meaningful while being embedded in situations which are socially structured. Social structures restrict their possibilities to choose among different options and strategies of acting in ways which are both subjectively satisfactory and recognised by society. While agency with regard to the self can be qualified as biographicity, participation may be seen as qualified agency with regard to sociality in public perspective.

Starting from this assumption, the aim was to understand how young people realise their agency through participation and citizenship under conditions of social change. Therefore, focus was laid on youth culture as the practices by which young people articulate the subjective meaning they ascribe to participation; and learning because under conditions of social change young people need to develop new forms of participation. The competencies needed for these forms necessarily can not be learned in formal education but require non-formal and especially informal learning.

Therefore, the aim was to include the numerous forms of participation of young people into the analysis which challenge the one-dimensional, institution-oriented notion of politics and the deficit-focused perspective on young people's political practice. We also tried to understand what leads young people to participate beyond sometimes unfavourable individual life conditions in terms of local deprivation, social exclusion or low qualification. As a working hypothesis we defined those acts as potentially participatory which individuals carry out in the public and/or directed to the public and thereby communicate with the wider community about their needs and interest, their legitimacy and adequacy of respective action.

The public aspect is crucial inasmuch as it distinguishes social action within limited groups of individuals from social action which addresses or at least does not exclude the anonymous generalised 'other' or 'co-citizen'. Thereby not all actions or coping strategies of young people are participatory per se but those which imply a consciousness of their social character and their relation with and dependency on the wider community.

This differentiation is necessary as there is serious critique not only towards the participation discourse but towards the agency discourse itself. Especially, with regard to neo-liberal trends towards policies aimed at activating individuals to be more self-responsible (rather than relying on social solidarity), participation is referred to as a "strategy of immunisation" which means a cultural process of re-coding the relationship between individual and society.

Content

Newsflash

UP2YOUTH Project News

Youth - actor of social change. Findings from European youth research
5th-6th March 2009, Brussels
Organised by UP2YOUTH together with the European Commission´s DG Research and other EU-funded research projects the findings of UP2YOUTH are presented and discussed in the light of other EU-funded youth research projects. More information under http://www.up2youth.org/content/view/181/2/

Intensive Study Programme 'Youth – actor of social change'
From 1 – 13 June students and teachers from the Universities of Cork, Ljubljana, Rennes, Tübingen and Valencia meet in Tübingen for a 2-week Intensive Study Programme funded by the ERASMUS programme. The seminar is based on the findings of the UP2YOUTH project and involves students from the disciplines of Education, Political Science, Social Work, Sociology and Psychology.
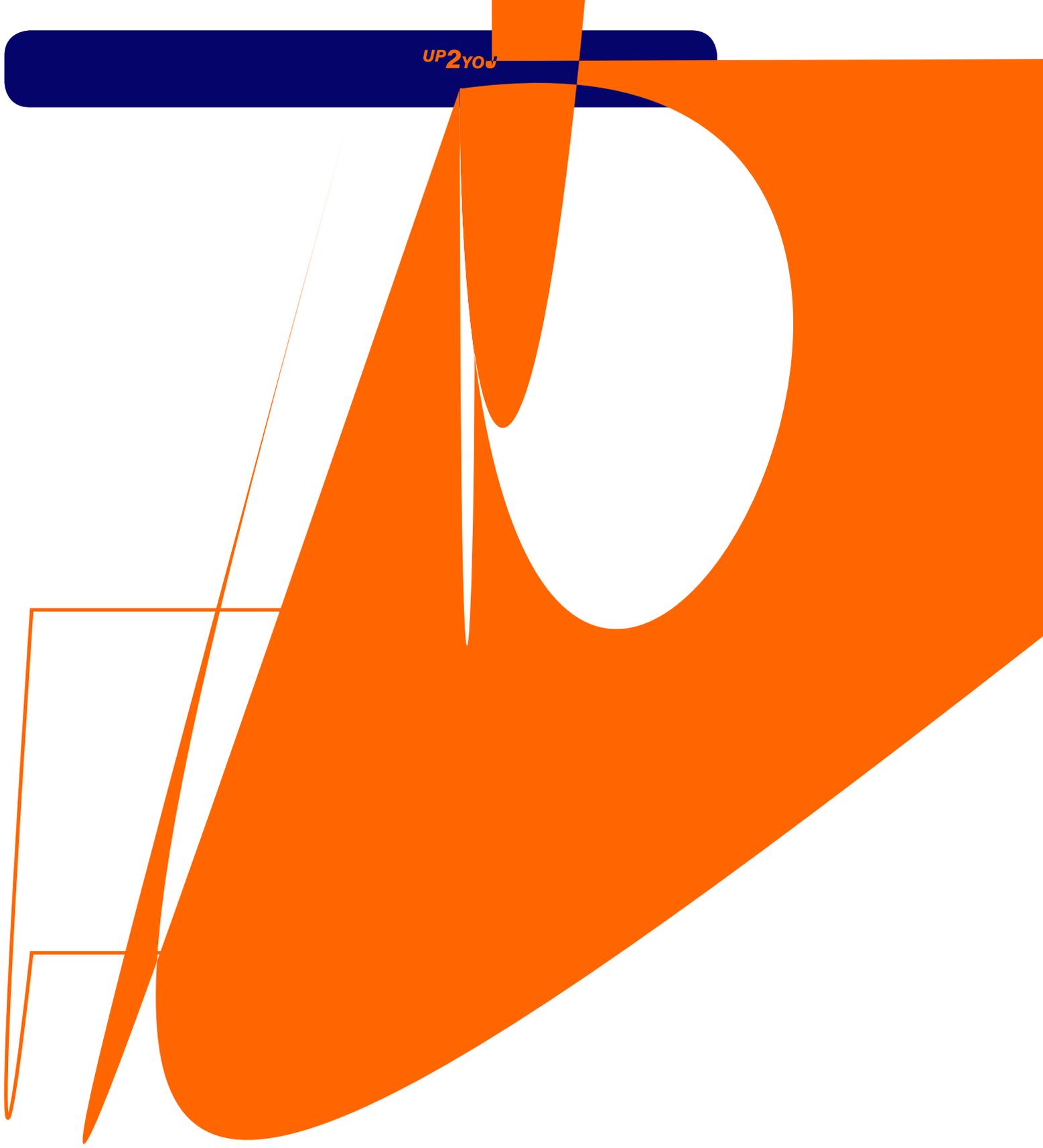
A frequent approach compares the degree of participation according to whether young people are only consulted or involved in decision-making and according to who initiates participatory processes, adults or young people themselves.

Contexts of participation

One of our aims consisted in bridging institutional levels and concrete forms of participation. For this purpose, a review was carried out of the different levels and contents of welfare and youth policies on the one hand, and of the forms of local youth participation on the other hand.

This process led us to examine the context of youth participation policies, in particular throughout welfare regimes and youth transition regimes, European youth policy and youth sector, national youth policies and local youth policies in ten local case studies: Innsbruck and Vienna (Austria); Rennes and Metz (France), Cork and Limerick (Ireland); Bologna and Palermo (Italy); Prievidza and Zvolen (Slovakia).

Formal forms of participation were the most common across the five countries. It appears rather preoccupying that none of the countries appears to have a system that allows young people to have a direct say in policy making although they all feature a variety of structures that allow limited participation in some form. Umbrella organisations such as the Austrian National Youth Council (BJV), the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), the Slovak Youth Council (RMS) and the Italian National Youth Forum share similar characteristics inasmuch as they bring together youth organisations for the common purposes of representing and serving young people.

Countries, regions and municipalities have developed and experimented with various forms of youth councils, youth parliaments or youth forums with mixed results. In Ireland a frequent criticism of the national youth parliament is that it merely follows an agenda set by adults and is unrepresentative of the vast majority of young people. In Rennes (France) a local youth council failed because it did not have a role in policy making; in Bologna (Italy) the last effort ended in failure in 1998 as it did not represent all young people. Conversely, in Austria children and youth parliaments are operating in several regions whilst in Slovakia a variation exists with areas prospering as others struggle.

Despite the rhetoric of various governments in relation to youth participation it appears that very little exists in the way of concrete and tangible mechanisms that would allow young people to directly participate in a meaningful manner in the policies that affect them most. In addition, to come back to the point of departure, the scarcity of existing research and the unclear relationship between wider contexts of national structures and particular local expressions did not allow identifying clear national patterns of participation.

Participation and learning

Youth is usually being referred to as a life phase characterised by preparation for the demands connected to the adult role including the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. In this constellation, the relationship between participation and learning is one of conditionality and postponement. In school the relationship between learning and participation is ambivalent. On the one side, citizenship education in most cases is limited to formal teaching on the system of parliamentary democracy, party politics and economic structures – which means knowledge for participation later and outside school. Consequently, students experience it as a normal school subject and in tendency as alienating. At the same time, in most countries the competencies of student councils are restricted to contributing to social school life while excluding issues of curriculum, discipline and graduation (only in Austria the legal basis of student councils foresees involvement in school management). This creates a double-bind situation in which young people learn that forms and contents of participation are pre-defined by others, i.e. adult institutional representatives.

This continues in transitions to work where options for choice tend to depend on qualifications while in training arrangements or in second chance measures for disadvantaged youth participation is secondary compared to labour market demands and vocational standards. On the contrary, the current trend to activation refers to self-responsibility of job-seekers regardless of the availability of jobs and the resources they have at their disposal.

Non-formal education in youth work appeared to be the most genuine context for participatory learning, especially when providing spaces for young people's appropriation processes such as in most cases in Austria, France and Ireland. In Italy and Slovakia, pre-organised leisure activities prevail.

Our analysis of selected areas of learning for participation show that most educational programmes, especially those in school and those related to forms of representative democracy, follow an objective of adapting young people to institutionalised forms and norms of participation whereby many young people experience citizenship education and learning for participation as alienating: first learn, then participate. In contrast, from a pedagogical perspective participation can only be learned 'by doing' and concrete experience which means that participation rights should not be the reward for but the prerequisite of learning participation. Education for citizenship needs to accept that learners may produce other interpretations, other contents and other forms of participation. Although none of our countries corresponds to a model of learning such as shown above, comparative analysis shows slight differences, whilst the scarcity of empirical data has also to be taken into consideration.

Participation and youth culture

To which extent does youth culture influence the forms of youth participation? To answer to this question, case studies were carried out which scrutinised different forms of participation which may view of public authorities: counter cultural expressions, young people's participation through the Internet, youth life styles and urban riots.

Political participation through counter cultures: As the results of our case studies show, young people in counter cultural scenes use different ways of participation: traditional and non-traditional ones. To a large extent, they follow and contribute to the formal political agenda inasmuch as they focus on environmental issues, peace, poverty, racism or education. We do not know about their turnout in elections but they organise protests and participate in demonstrations as well as in discussions and negotiations with local politicians. Instead of asking why young people are not interested in traditional politics anymore and trying to increase their traditional participation rates, one could also regard young people's activities and ideas as innovations, especially if taking into account that many themes of the political agenda have resulted from social movements in which often younger generations have been influential (e.g. environmental issues). Additionally, we have to consider new concepts of participation as they are performed by young people in post-subcultural scenes. Their alternative lifestyles, their emphasis of 'own' concepts and conducts of life, as well as their own practices – often referred to as subversive – need to be regarded as political action in their own right.

Political participation in the Internet: A new issue which has been especially analysed by the EU-funded CIVICWEB project (www.civicweb.eu) is the Internet as a resource and arena of political participation. This research field is relatively new, because most analysis of the impact of information technologies and new media on social and civic cultures have not yet differentiated according to age groups, especially young people. As revealed by many youth studies, the new generation is much more interested in specific universal political topics and social issues on local level than in the traditional political expressions forms. The digital world permits them to network on contingent problems and to see in short the effects of their action, creating a virtual circle between action and engagement. At the same time, there are researchers arguing that the Internet itself does not reflect a fundamentally new age of political participation but only a powerful medium whereby the digital divide reproduces social divisions while institutions use it for traditional political behaviours.

Youth cultures - leisure or participation? The effects of the normative dimension inherent to research on participation becomes even more obvious where youth cultural activities are concerned which at first sight are merely leisure oriented. At the same time there are various examples in which public is both stage and target of such activities and therefore implies a latent political dimension. This is the case with websites such as Myspace or Facebook which are used for personal homepages (providing public visibility) but also for rating school teachers (the political dimension of this becomes evident in the aggressive reactions of both school authorities and teacher trade unions). Another example are the Skaters for which conquering and presenting oneself in the public is a core element of their youth cultural activities. While this is not necessarily their prime objective this leads to conflict with authorities and potentially to their politicisation. For example, as a consequence of such conflict Cork Skaters (Ireland) campaigned and participated in municipal elections.

Urban riots – deviance or claim for participation? The ambivalent question "participation or not?" extends to phenomena such as urban riots in which protagonists apply illegal methods and even violence (e.g. recent events in French suburbs or Athens). From an institutional perspective it seems obvious and easy to deny their participatory potential through criminalising. At the same time, it needs to be questioned whether they would have really had access to recognised forms of participation which were open for issues of subjective important relevance and which they perceived as effective. Obviously this question is even more ambiguous with regard to right-wing extremism which apparently follows the formal political agenda (e.g. Europe, welfare, migration) while questioning and neglecting democratic values and procedures – yet not only and not always in anti-democratic ways.

Conclusions

Concluding, our research primarily questions the validity of established forms of youth participation, not only because they are only accepted by a minority of mostly privileged young people but also because primarily reflecting the interest of existing institutions and political classes. In contrast, our analysis of participation under conditions of individualisation and especially of participation in school, transitions to work and youth cultures, suggests accepting all activities of young people as potentially participatory which are carried out in and/or with regard to the public. This requires further research with regard to

- the subjective meaning of participation and politics from the biographical perspective of young men and women;
- the implicit dimensions of collectivism and public consciousness inherent to young people's choices and activities.

With regard to better comparative knowledge on participation more information is needed on

- structures of national and local youth policies and their relationship as well as dominant forms of youth participation;
- the relationship between different degrees of membership in organisations, forms of political articulation and institutional structures of participation;
- the relationship between youth participation and general structures of youth policy, youth transitions (welfare, education etc.), legal status and cultural notions of youth.

Pais, José Machado (2008): „Young people, citizenship and leisure", in René Bendit & Marina Hahn-Bleibtreu (eds.), Youth Transitions. Processes of social inclusion and patterns of vulnerability in a globalised world, Barbara Budrich Publishers Opladen &Farmington Hills, Leverkusen, 2008, pp. 227-243.

Thomson, Rachel (2009): Unfolding lives. Youth, gender and change. Bristol: Policy Press.

van Dongen, Walter (2008): Towards a democratic division of labour in Europe? The Combination Model as a new integrated approach to professional and family life. Bristol: Policy Press.