



YFJ approach to child policy - What is the role of the YFJ?

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Executive summary

Youth policy and policies addressing the needs of children are complex and often overlapping - both from the perspective of age range and content, and duly emphasise the need to establish clearly the role of the European Youth Forum (YFJ) in this context. The YFJ has developed an accurate and in-depth knowledge of youth policy and affirms that empowering young people is a prerequisite for any meaningful and successful youth policy: it believes that empowering young people starts with the empowerment of children.

The challenge for the YFJ in dealing with child policy is not to broaden the scope of its policy areas, as most of the content and processes often actually concern both children and youth. The central implication for the YFJ would rather be to mainstream, within its existing work and expertise, the issue of child participation, and to take the point of view of children into account, based on a more considerate and conscious approach.

In this Policy Paper the YFJ addresses three aspects of participation of children: empowering children - giving them the opportunity to form their own opinions and to have these opinions taken into account in any matter affecting them; promoting the participation of children in public life - in a way that is recognised by stakeholders, and through structures and processes that respond to the ways children express themselves; and promoting participation in the daily environment - experienced in schools and kindergartens, through student representative bodies, and through youth organisations.

A prerequisite for involving children in activities and structures is the guarantee of conditions for safe and meaningful participation by youth organisations. Protecting children from exploitation and abuse must be paramount and particular attention should be paid to issues related to sexuality and sexual harassment.

The participation of children should be granted and encouraged. Whereas the lack of co-ordination on the European level indicates that the current landscape of organisations is not yet ready to directly include children in all structures of youth representation, the YFJ should actively support and co-ordinate the role of Member Organisations working with children in participatory respects. The YFJ itself should actively engage in child policy where it overlaps with youth policy. However, the necessary support for further development has to be offered to such initiatives both by institutions and other youth-led organisations.

1. Introduction

While the mission of the European Youth Forum is to work on the well-being of young people, the question of dealing with developments in child policy arises as these may have implications upon young people.

“One of the challenges of youth policy is the lack of common agreement on the age range covered by the term ‘youth’. The general agreement is that youth is the period between childhood and adulthood. According to different institutions, indicators, and statistical data, childhood lasts until the age of 18, whereas from fifteen onwards, some institutions or indicators consider an individual to be in their youth. The same uncertainty exists when defining the upper range of youth - again, depending on the approach, this can vary from 24 to 35 years old. While the European Youth Forum considers that youth policy should not be defined as serving only those within a certain age bracket, the YFJ is convinced that the debate on age limits highlights the need for a youth policy covering a broad age range - taking into account individual differences in the transition to adulthood and addressing the autonomy of young people.”¹

This definition shows the complexity and the overlapping nature of youth policy and policies addressing the needs of children - both from the perspective of age range and content, and duly emphasize the need to establish clearly the role of the European Youth Forum (YFJ) in this context.

Similarly, given that most National Youth Councils and a number of international youth NGOs currently undertake work, with young people, that pertains to children, the need for the YFJ to define its approach to policies targeting the latter social group is again made clear. With little or no co-ordination between the individual youth organisations currently tackling the political representation of children, adult associations working with children as passive participants have, as a result, fashioned themselves as “children’s representatives” and have tried to fill the vacuum². Member Organisations of the YFJ already run successful projects with children, involving them democratically at all stages of a given process. However, due to the lack of a network, or of adequate co-ordination and funding, hardly any exchange of best practice takes place: youth-led organisations active in this field are then left alone, relying on their own expertise and experiences. This inevitably results in a situation where international work on children’s issues is not monitored for quality.

The UN and the Council of Europe have for many years been focusing on the well-being of children and the impact of one’s childhood upon one’s youth: and recently, the European Union has also engaged in these issues. In

¹ From “Meeting young people’s needs” YFJ approach to youth policy, Adopted by the YFJ General Assembly, 9-11 November 2006, Vilnius (Lithuania)(0590-06)

² This can also lead to such organisations defining themselves as promoters of the welfare and the rights of both children and young people. In the end, this can be misleading regarding the question of who is representing (and considered a representative of) whom.

addition, the European Commission Communication ‘Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child’ COM(2006)367 has given us a starting point for a common process on children rights, bringing together all the key international and national actors in the pursuit of the effective fulfilment of children rights. Numerous research papers have duly been published on the situation of children and their challenges in life - for example, the report of the Bureau of European Policy Advisors, “Investing in Youth: an empowerment strategy”³, which demonstrates that youth investment begins at an earlier age, and which establishes strong links between policies affecting children and policies affecting young people. This highlights the need for a continuity in investment - something for which children and youth organisations have also been asking.

The YFJ has developed an accurate and in-depth knowledge of youth policy and affirms that empowering young people is a prerequisite for any meaningful and successful youth policy: it believes that empowering young people starts with the empowerment of children.

Unfortunately, child-related policies often regard a child only as the recipient of a policy, as someone who needs the protection and care of adults. The various legal instruments developed and agreed upon to defend children are a positive and necessary step by institutions and governments, because they recognize a child’s needs on an individual level, and not only as part of a family group. However, this victim-based approach thus leads to policies dealing mainly with child protection.

Acknowledging that the protection of children is a crucial need, the YFJ nonetheless believes that children cannot be seen only as victims but should be equally considered as actors in their own right. Therefore, institutional child policies need to be more rights-based, and grounded in a common understanding of the value of the active participation of younger groups in society.

2. Background

According to the UN Convention of the Rights of Child, a child is defined as a person aged up to 18 years old. This is used as a legal definition by many countries across the world and sounds clear and easy to use. Regardless of this, other legal requirements give some rights to persons that are *de jure* still considered as children: this can be the age of consent, limited contractual capabilities, and full liability and regulations on vocational education, training and employment. These regulations differ notably from one country to another; similarly, electoral rights and military service obligations may not go hand in hand.

The YFJ acknowledges the legal framework that defines children, but wants to stress that in today’s society one cannot ignore the fact that, in some

³ Report released the 25th April 2007.
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/policy_advisers/publications/docs/Investing_in_Youth_25_April_fin.pdf

aspects of life, young people under 18 years of age are becoming more independent at an earlier moment in their lives than in previous decades. On the other hand, due to precarious circumstances, e.g. regarding employment, they often rely on the support of their parents for longer than before. Thus, young people cannot be considered in only one of the aforementioned dimensions: not simply as individuals in need of protection and support, nor as fully independent, self-reliant 'adults'.

Youth, as a transitional period, is expanding - as it now starts at an earlier stage in life and finishes later than ever before. This is one of the main reasons why the YFJ decided not to define a lower age threshold for youth. The purpose, which is also reflected in the Youth Forum statutes, is to ensure a focus on youth-related issues; in view of the age range, youth issues can also comprise policies targeting children, e.g. exchanges, individual pupil mobility schemes⁴, health, education, to name but a few. Taking this into account, the YFJ statutes currently only identify an upper age limit (35 years old).

Institutional youth programmes have, for their part, established an age range: the Youth in Action Programme of the European Commission targets young people from 13 years old, while the World Programme of Action for Youth⁵ considers that youth begins at 15 years old. These differences show that there is no common agreement on when youth begins, but also show that one can concurrently be considered a young person before reaching 18 years old, and a child.

Child policy, just as youth policy in general, needs to be mainstreamed. While, to a certain extent, the two imply different approaches - child policy often being more human-rights-based than the already more developed fields of youth policy - there are in reality only a few situations in which youth policy and child policy do not overlap.

3. Approach: building upon existing expertise within the YFJ

Creating a link between childhood and adulthood⁶, and being aware of the particular needs and rights of a young person prior to their 'youth', is a means of contributing to better youth policy and ultimately, to the improved well-being and conditions of all young people.

The challenge for the European Youth Forum in dealing with child policy is not to broaden the scope of its policy areas, as most of the content and processes often actually concern both children and youth. The central implication for the YFJ would rather be to mainstream, within its existing work and expertise, the issue of child participation, and to take the point of

⁴ See the *Comenius* programme of the European Commission

⁵ The World Programme of Action for Youth is an international strategy adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1995 to address more effectively the problems of young men and women and to increase opportunities for their participation in society. It seeks to make Governments more responsive to the aspirations of youth for a better world, as well as to the demands of youth to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

⁶ From the Work Plan 2007-2008 of the European Youth Forum

view of children into account, based on a more considerate and conscious approach.

The YFJ would however thus follow political processes linked to child policies - such as the developments of the future EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child or the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child - as these concern and affect young people.

The expertise built up in the youth sector and by youth organisations can be of great benefit to any institution and organisation working with policy development linked to the well-being of children. The YFJ can itself refer to the broad variety of its membership, which holds knowledge and experience in the field. The role of the YFJ would be to promote best practice as well as to share existing knowledge among its members by providing the suitable networking and channels towards stakeholders.

Alongside this, the YFJ can offer support to those Member Organisations interested in developing their contribution and support to external partners in this regard. The value added by YFJ MOs is that, as peer-led organisations, they have a unique contribution to offer in the field of children's rights, and are often ahead of developments in other organisations. There is a lot of interest from external partners about what YFJ Member Organisations are doing in this regard, and through comprehensive co-ordination, this needs to be promoted to optimum effect.

At the same time, the YFJ would be counting on those members directly interested in and following relevant processes, to contribute with specific content input.

4. The participation of children: the main focus

4.1 Empowering children

Children are often perceived, from an institutional perspective - but also from the point of view of some organisations providing services to children - not as actors but as recipients. While acknowledging that children need to be provided with tailored programmes and policies, the European Youth Forum believes that it is imperative to empower children in order to allow them to be recognised as actors.

The empowerment of children is an often neglected issue, as it is commonly understood - though left unspoken - that children are immature and too young to voice their concerns, opinions and hopes. Focus is therefore more readily placed on social and health policies, rather than on participation policies. Yet, the right of children to form their own opinions and to have these opinions taken into account in any matter affecting them, and their right to freedom of assembly, are clearly stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12 and Article 15). Youth organisations can be the providers of a framework in which children can realise civic participation. Indeed, the Member Organisations of the YFJ currently

provide spaces in which children can play, learn, explore and participate actively.

Yet the nature of such spaces needs to be defined clearly and Member Organisations can legitimately demand that the YFJ facilitates and empowers them to undertake this process of definition. Child participation projects need to be able to provide a stable yet empowering environment. The YFJ has to emphasize that the opinions and contributions of children hold an added value for societal analysis and policy development.

It is of no doubt that the needs and capacities of children are distinct from other age groups through their intrinsic situation, and therefore, children may require a different expert approach. Children connect well with direct and tangible processes in their local environment and with policy-related issues that are presented in a tangible manner. However, with sufficient support and creative methods, children can also grasp complex issues and express strong opinions on them: their capacities need simply to be fostered. Children are capable of meaningful participation in democratic processes, yet the participatory needs of children are not yet taken into account at the European level in the way they deserve to be. Via its expertise on creating an empowering environment, and via its contacts with institutions, the YFJ should lobby for the development of child participation and contribute in this regard to different institutional processes.

4.2 Participation in public life

While working on lowering voting ages to 16⁷, the YFJ is indirectly working on the participation of children (as per the legal perspective), and on the rights of children to express themselves. Nevertheless children below 16 years old also need to be heard.

Empowering children is meaningful if structures and support are provided. The European Youth Forum, in the framework of its general mission of promoting youth participation, will promote democratic, transparent independent and membership-based structures for the active participation of children, at all levels. These structures should allow children to voice their concerns in a way that is recognised by stakeholders. Nevertheless, children have different ways to express themselves, and thus diverse types of structures and processes need to be set up to allow every child to participate. The YFJ urges all institutions working on child policy development to involve organisations that do already provide such facilities.

Primarily, authorities at the local level should facilitate the creation of spaces allowing children to contribute with their skills, e.g. in city or landscape planning. Such examples of active consultation should also be reflected upon for the national and European levels, as suggested above.

4.3 Participation in the daily environment

⁷ Reference made to the YFJ COMEM resolution on lowering the voting age to 16 (0367-07)

Participation is about the rights, the tools, the space and, where necessary, the support to exercise democracy. Children might need more support in the first instance to contribute fully as active citizens, but they must not be treated as second-class people by the mere reflex of socio-cultural prejudices. Therefore, the participation of children needs to tackle every aspect of their lives and will, in the long run, strengthen the basis of a democratic society.

Schools and kindergartens, as the main institutional environments of every child, need to be places where participation⁸ and empowerment can be experienced and exercised. Concretely, it is vital to have school student representative bodies in all schools (also in primary education) where the students elect their representatives and engage in the democratic governance of schools. Such a culture can also be developed through improving and enhancing formal education curricula through the integration of non-formal education methodologies. Youth-led organisations can back public efforts and be the think tanks and examples of best practice for new approaches in this regard.

More generally speaking, children have the right to organise and should be supported to do so in appropriate and relevant ways, in order to make their voices heard. Youth organisations play a large role in this regard, as they provide an empowering environment for children. In order to achieve this, the democratic rights of the youngest individual members within their structures should be ensured⁹. Youth organisations should comprehensively consider how to ensure those basic rights to every child willing to join their structures. Reflecting on existing practice would lead to specific work on the tools and mechanisms to be enhanced or developed within each organisation: in such a way, youth organisations will consider and take into account existing limits to engaging with children, particularly with regard to legal boundaries. Legal boundaries should however, not be seen solely as restrictive, but should also lead youth organisations to develop innovative approaches to guarantee the participation of children within their structures.

A prerequisite for involving children in activities and structures is the guarantee of conditions for safe and meaningful participation by youth organisations. Protecting children from exploitation and abuse must be paramount and particular attention should be paid to issues related to sexuality and sexual harassment.

To create such a safe environment, it is important that youth organisations provide training and education to their leaders, trainers and members. Such educational opportunities should deal specifically with how to create

⁸ This right is stated in article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child “*States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*”

⁹ Ibid.

genuine opportunities for participation, and how to encourage and foster the expression and contribution of opinions. It is equally important that youth leaders can share their experiences, obtain support and find different ways of dealing with issues that arise while working with children.

In addition to preparing leaders, trainers and other youth workers to be ready to deal with sensitive issues connected with the vulnerability of the children and youth with whom they work, youth organisations involving children should provide youth leaders with comprehensive and relevant guidance.

5. Conclusion

The participation of children should be granted and encouraged. Whereas the lack of co-ordination on the European level indicates that the current landscape of organisations is not yet ready to directly include children in all structures of youth representation, the European Youth Forum should actively support and co-ordinate the role of Member Organisations working with children in participatory respects. The YFJ itself should actively engage in child policy where it overlaps with youth policy.

The necessary support for further development has to be offered to such initiatives both by institutions and other youth-led organisations. The YFJ supports demands for the financial support of multilateral projects with children and calls upon institutions to recognise the efforts of the existing projects and experiences of its MOs. The civic participation of children needs to be understood and developed in the framework of their skills and competences.

Children are part of society and are therefore affected by policies directly and indirectly targeting them, and the European Youth Forum will need the expertise of its Member Organisations when engaging in this dimension of its work. The YFJ will promote and exchange the expertise of the various youth-led organisations working with children within its membership, and also that of its partners. The awareness of this expertise outside the membership duly needs to be increased, in order to elaborate ways to support existing initiatives.