



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND STUDENTS

Round Table – Conclusions

These conclusions are the outcome of a round table dedicated to the civic engagement of young people and students organized by the DEMAS association in cooperation with PILnet, the global network for public interest law. It was attended by 18 participants representing NGOs, umbrella non-profit organizations, local governments and local bodies of public administration and teachers and students of both public and private universities. The conclusions are thematically divided into three areas – Engagement and its forms, Why do they engage?, and in particular How to guide their engagement. This last part captures the needs of youth and students with relation to the non-profit sector which can and should act as a mediator in the process of learning public participation. These conclusions should serve as a guideline especially for the non-profit sector dedicated to education and promoting the involvement of young people and students. Donors, educational institutions and other bodies of public administration may also find them insightful.

Round Table annotation

The aim of the discussion was to find examples of good practice of youth civic engagement. The debate looked for ways to motivate students to engage and to make innovative proposals. So that even those who choose to work in the private sector can understand the challenges faced by the civil society and support it.

Engagement and its forms

Individualization of society is significantly reflected in volunteering and youth engagement as well. The young people of today focus on personal gain more and more; such personal gain is not necessarily – or primarily – of a material nature. Meaningfulness and purposefulness of personal involvement is a key issue in participation in public affairs.

Everybody does not engage in the same way. Engaging enthusiastic and natural leaders is essential, but those who are less assertive wish to be involved as well. Therefore, an individual's engagement cannot be perceived in a binary fashion – I participate or I do not participate at all. Rather, it can be seen as a scale on which, depending on the subject and time, the degree of engagement varies.

This is related to the issue of inclusiveness of different initiatives. While spontaneous actions are able to include less active individuals who will follow because of the urgency of the topic, availability and overall attractiveness (e.g. Fridays for Future) but more complex engagement involving an entry into a particular project process is something which is rather done by individuals who are used to engagement and who have necessary competencies and perseverance.

Lack of involvement is an important issue as well. It is necessary to ask ourselves this question: Why are

some people passive or opposed to such activity? Or why some even opt for anti-systemic engagement.

Why are they involved?

Motivation to participate is not the same for everyone. In general, young people's involvement is linked to searching for their own identity. Logically, they join communities which they like and which they find meaningful. They choose not only according to the goals of the institution or initiative, but also according to what kind of connections they prefer, looser or tighter ones.

The nature of the activity in the civic participation itself is a combination of the desire to help others or contribute to the common good as the individual sees it, as well as self-realization as an element which appears more and more. Young people ask, "What will I get out of this?" Especially with more institutionalized involvement, they look for opportunities to learn new skills, gain insights or experience.

Young people are able to get involved at the local level where they feel they are a part of their community and can imagine how their contribution can help transform the environment in which they live. In such cases, they want to finish things. On the contrary, emotions are central to spontaneous events of general nature. A certain tension triggers initiation which grows into a shared interest. However, even such activities subsequently seek a more organized structure which is necessary to sustain and maintain interest in the activities.

How to guide engagement

Non-profit organizations play an important role in civic engagement of young people and students. In this process, it is necessary to encourage individuals to trust themselves, and to show them opportunities for engagement. In addition to motivation, they must also have the capacity, skills and awareness of civic culture. Belief in the fact that their engagement will change something is essential. Individuals who attempt civic engagement should not be discouraged in their first attempts. Once it sets in, frustration is difficult to overcome. The initiation moments for participation in the course of an individual's life may be scarce and will most likely be local. Non-governmental and non-profit organizations must play the part of a guide in this a process. They must offer help to young people who wish to participate.

While active individuals will always find a way, it is important help those who are passive and underprivileged. In order to acquire skills, it is advisable to prepare projects in which young people become a part of a team. Teams usually have drivers and as well as members who are less agile. However, even for them such experience is important and can be formative.

Engaging the underprivileged with little self-confidence, to which their social status can also be a contributing factor, is difficult. Common practices like applying for educational projects do not work. However, it is possible to approach them in an indirect way, for instance, through artistic expression. Working with emotions is essential.

Media and social networks play an important part, especially in the framework of informal and non-project participation. Tension and awakening in the young people come mainly from the online space from which it is transferred into the offline world.

The education system plays an important part in learning civic participation, but it cannot be expected to do this alone. The non-profit sector and civil society in general must be a partner for schools and continue to offer their projects. It is important to perceive schools as a meeting space which reflects the social and pluralistic view of society. Last but not least, it is necessary to perceive the diversity of regions and individual schools, which also has an impact on education for civic engagement.