



European Youth Forum
Position Paper on
'Life-wide Learning for Active Citizenship'

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What is Citizenship?

Citizenship is a contested term. It can be considered as a **status in a political, legal and social community**: a set of rights and responsibilities that the State grants the individual in a civic contract. It is a set of legal rules that defines membership of the political community. These rights include legal rights such as (freedom of speech, thought, religious belief, the right to own property etc) and political rights (the right to participate and exercise power).¹

The European Youth Forum, through its member organisations, works to support youth organisations and thus encourages young people to participate in the communities around them. Having the right to participate in these communities does not necessarily imply doing so in practice. Citizenship is also a **role**, which demands active participation.² As was the case with the system of direct democracy in Ancient Greece, a system of representative democracy depends on the participation of citizens to function.

Active citizenship consists of three separate but mutually dependent qualities: **involvement, participation and influence**. Each of these requires pre-determined attitudes and institutional arrangements:

- A) Involvement - everyone's knowledge, experience and opinions are required if the decisions are to be good. Citizens must feel engaged in what is happening in the world around them.
- B) Participation - Citizens should not merely have the possibility to participate. They should feel that they have the duty and responsibility to do so.
- C) Influence - young people should be able to see the connection between participation and the results achieved. Those who participate must feel their input is important and that the decisions have an impact.³

The European Youth Forum believes that citizenship is not merely a legal entity but is multifaceted. Citizens belong to many different communities - **social, economic and cultural** operating and having an impact on different geographic levels. Social citizenship implies the interrelations between a certain group of individuals. Economic citizenship expresses the relationship between the individual and the labour and consumer market.⁴ Cultural citizenship is a common awareness of sharing a cultural heritage with others. In order to participate in these communities, citizens must feel a

¹ Birzea Cesar, 'Education for Democratic Citizenship: a Lifelong Learning Perspective

² European Commission, 'Education for Active Citizenship', p 5-7

³ 'Miss Myself: Learning Democracy', May 9-11 Stockholm, Sweden

⁴ Vleldhuis, Ruud, 'Education for Democratic Citizenship: Dimensions of Citizenship, Core Competencies, Variables and International Activities, pt. 3

sense of attachment to their community ⁵, a sense of belonging and have the information and knowledge necessary for active participation

What Factors have led to a Decline in Participation?

A global shift in values and the rapid pace of social, economic and political change is altering the relationship between the individual and his/her society and calling into question the very nature of this role. This is not the place for an in-depth sociological analysis of the social developments, which have led to the decline in participation rates. However, certain distinct factors can be identified.

- Greater mobility and immigration between different countries has led to greater cultural diversity within these countries themselves. With the growing influence of the European Union, people have to come to terms with their European as well as regional and national identity. Multiple identities and citizenship's are possible. Even within relatively homogenous countries, urban sprawl and longer periods spent commuting are leading to disintegration of traditional communities.⁶ They are no longer distinct, but fluid and transitory. It is becoming more and more difficult to create a sense of belonging to a distinct community. People have split allegiances and blurred identities.
- The pressures of time and money, including the special pressures on two-career families, contribute to the diminution of our social and community involvement. The decline in traditional social structures has led to growing anomie and isolation. People require more spontaneous individualist methods of expressing their values and beliefs.
- Technological developments in mass media have led to the creation of a 'virtual community'. It is possible to belong as an observer looking in from the outside without participating actively in this community itself.⁷ Participation is passive. Our leisure time has become more confined to the private sphere. A dependence on televised entertainment has been identified as one of the main reasons for the drop in civic and social engagement in community life.

All these factors have created more diverse forms of participation for the individual in multiple communities and have tended to threaten the legitimacy of traditional democratic structures.

⁵ Howard Williamson calls this 'normative citizenship' - 'Citizenship and Community', Youth Work Press, p. 2

⁶ Putnam, Robert, 'Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community', p.283

⁷ *ibid*, p. 246

The Importance of Promoting Citizenship Education

The Youth Forum is concerned with the decline in the participation of young people in traditional political structures. Growing political disaffection is evident from the low turnout of people aged 18-30 in elections. The problem of the democratic deficit is acknowledged by the European and national parliaments alike.

It is clear that there is a growing distrust in traditional democratic institutions. The abuses and problems of representative democracy are well known: politicians and parties take on a life and interests of their own, elite and corruption can flourish. Sometimes there has been a stress on private gain as against the common good.⁸

Many citizens fail to have confidence in political institutions because they cannot see the value and benefits involvement brings. In a recent Eurobarometer opinion poll, it is interesting to note that only 4% of young Europeans think that political parties are the most important structures to encourage the active participation of young people in society.⁹

As political questions become increasingly technical, young people feel alienated from political debates. 'Many people are losing confidence in a poorly understood and complex system to deliver the policies that they want.'¹⁰ They feel a loss of effective public control over the key areas of shared public life such as health and education.¹¹

Young people are less committed to the traditional political and social structures than their forefathers. 'Most show a clear will to participate and to influence the choices made by their society but they wish to do so...outside of the old participatory structures and mechanisms'¹²

There is also a lack of information for young people about democratic institutions. A 1999 IEA Civic Institution Study showed that while students in most countries have an understanding of fundamental democratic values and institutions, their understanding is often superficial and they have not acquired the skills to interpret political materials.¹³

Citizenship is one of the priorities on the EU agenda at present. The Maastricht Treaty (article 8-8e) 1993 gave the concept of European citizenship a treaty base by explicitly granting civil and political rights such as freedom of movement, the right to vote in European Parliament elections, the right to diplomatic protection and the right to petition the European Parliament. The Amsterdam Treaty went further in specifying these rights. The Charter of Fundamental Rights approved by the European Council in Nice in December 2000 enumerates a large number of rights that European citizens are entitled to. The European Commission also published a White Paper on Governance in July 2001 in order to address the problem of low

⁸ Jeffs T & Smith M, 'Informal Education: Informal Education, Conversation, Democracy & Learning

⁹ Young Europeans in 2001: Results of a European Opinion Poll, p 4

¹⁰ White Paper on European Governance, p.3

¹¹ Jeffs T & Smith M, 'Informal Education: Informal Education, Conversation, Democracy & Learning

¹² European Commission White Paper: A New Impetus for Youth p.10

¹³ Civic Education Study, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 1999

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participation rates in elections and lack of faith in EU institutions. The White Paper on Youth addresses the problem of the lack of participation of young people specifically in political life. Since the European Youth Forum promotes multiple levels of citizenship including EU citizenship, it wishes to be actively involved in EU policy developments on citizenship.

POLICY OBJECTIVES

A: WHAT SKILLS AND COMPETENCES ARE NECESSARY TO PROMOTE PARTICIPATION?

Political Literacy

The Youth Forum believes that citizenship education should aim to give young people a basic understanding of the concepts of democracy and enable them to learn how democracy functions and how political decisions are made. Young people should be aware of their rights and duties as citizens. They should know basic laws and political rights and recognise the importance of democratic institutions. They should be able to understand the role of political parties and interest groups and know how to influence policy developments. They should also learn to be aware of current political problems and know how to keep informed of recent developments.

Democratic Attitudes and Values

The Youth Forum believes that citizenship education should inspire young people to take an interest in social and political affairs. It should enable them to learn and develop a sense of responsibility. It should give them the necessary tools to have the confidence to actively participate in society. Through citizenship education, they can develop a critical relation towards democratic institutions. They should learn to accept and understand difference and respect others. Citizenship education should foster awareness of identity with a European and a global context and recognise core values (democracy, social justice, human rights, for example). Political education must emphasise the difference between the perfect democratic institution and working towards making it perfect, setting improvement in small steps as the main philosophy towards achieving political literacy.

Critical Skills

However as we have already stated, citizenship is not only about understanding one's status in society but about acting out a role. In order to act, young people must be able to take a position based on their critical analysis. They should learn to collect information from different media. More importantly, they must learn to analyse it and interpret it. Then they should know how to judge it, form an opinion on it and take a position. Communication skills are vital to be able to argue and express one's views in political discussions.

B) WHERE CAN THESE SKILLS AND COMPETENCES BEST BE LEARNED?

Non-Formal Citizenship Education in Youth Organisations

Non-formal learning is learning that takes place outside of the formal education system (in youth organisations, for example). It provides a creative complement to classical teaching methods since the individual learns in a particular context through personal interaction. Because of their nature and structure, youth organisations are often much better placed than schools to provide young people with practical learning experiences which promote and enhance active citizenship.

It is interesting to note that while 26% of young people consider the education system an important structure for encouraging young people's active participation in society, 20% believe youth organisations to be important.¹⁴ Many of the activities developed by youth organisations contribute on a daily basis to the construction of a more peaceful, democratic society in which all individuals are encouraged to develop their capacities to their full potential. Through their active participation in youth organisations, young people learn to be committed, to take initiative and to take responsibility. They learn how to show respect for others and to show solidarity with others. By learning communication and interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, leadership, management, planning, teamwork and problem-solving skills, their confidence increases. One study of Italy shows that democratic virtues, confidence and self-esteem are created through civil associations. Organisations provide the individual with the opportunity to take responsibility for their common concerns and to develop the 'personality of democracy'.¹⁵

Formal Citizenship Education in Schools

The ethos, organisation, extra-curricular activities and operational structure of schools have a significant impact on the pupil's understanding of the civil, social and political dimension of their lives. Through its 'hidden curriculum', a school provides aspects of citizenship education (both good and bad) even where this is not explicit. However, the Youth Forum believes that certain subject areas are considered essential for any school curriculum on citizenship education. These include human rights education, civics education, health education, sustainable development, global awareness, gender equality, intercultural learning and media education. While some of these subjects could be taught as individual components of a specific school subject on citizenship, others lend themselves to incorporation in other subject areas such as history, sociology, biology and geography. The Youth Forum condemns the privatisation of the school system and encourages the enforcement of a high quality public school, independent and capable of offering the best to everyone, without any other sort of discrimination, for example, social appartenance, religion or citizenship.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the importance of active participatory citizenship education. Young people must learn to be proactive rather than reactive.¹⁶

¹⁴ Eurobarometer Young Europeans in 2001: Results of a European Opinion Poll, p.4

¹⁵ Putnam, R, 'Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy,' Princeton

¹⁶ European Commission, 'Learning for Active Citizenship', p.10

In traditional forms of education it is the teacher who takes the initiatives and the students who respond. This form of pedagogy induces passivity. It does not encourage students to take responsibility and practice autonomy. If students are to become proactive, they must learn to take responsibility and manage their own learning process. They must learn to listen. They must learn how to learn. They must learn by doing rather than by listening. Pupil and student councils and the education system, by providing open spaces for active citizenship in schools, have an irreplaceable role to play. By participating in school decision-making bodies, pupils experience democracy in reality and are directly affected by its functioning. This is particularly important for young people who have more limited opportunities to participate in youth organisations.

Citizenship Education through Lifewide Learning in Other Environments

Lifelong learning means learning from formal, non-formal and informal contexts.¹⁷ In order to be able to gain personal fulfilment and contribute to the development of society, citizens must learn to learn throughout their lives in order to be able to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. Autonomy is a prerequisite for any environment where young people can practice active citizenship. Young people must learn to make use of the opportunities around them to learn continuously.¹⁸ Home and peer groups also provide learning environments, which are conducive to citizenship education. Continuing education after school contributes to the personal development of the individual and increases self-confidence and autonomy.¹⁹ In short, they become empowered to participate in the world around them. Lifewide learning is a crucial means of empowering the individual not only to cope with change but to become an active agent of change.

¹⁷ 'Lifelong Learning and Lifewide Learning, Skolverket.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p.25

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 16

ACTION POINTS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The European Youth Forum

- **The Youth Forum will continue its work to promote citizenship education for young people in formal and non-formal settings.** It will monitor the work of the European institutions in this area and contribute to the future development of policies and programmes concerned with citizenship education.
- **The Youth Forum encourages youth organisations to pay greater attention to how they are promoting and practising citizenship within their organisations and to publish the results of their work.** It urges them to make membership to their organisations accessible to as many young people as possible so that they have the opportunity to learn the skills and competencies necessary for active citizenship throughout their lives. Further research will be carried out by the Youth Forum on how non-formal education contributes to citizenship and ways in which this non-formal education can be given greater recognition. The Youth Forum will continue to disseminate examples of good practice on non-formal learning.
- **The Youth Forum will lobby for the recognition of non-formal learning that is achieved in youth organisations and to give it the same consideration as academic credentials gained in academic institutions.** It urges schools, universities, trade unions and business to value and recognise the educational content of the activities of youth organisations and the skills and competencies that young people gain by participating in them.

National Governments

- **The Youth Forum invites national governments to support and recognise National Youth Councils.**²⁰ Youth Councils play an important role in supporting youth organisations. (Some European countries have yet to establish a National Youth Council). In order to make their work as democratic as possible and to ensure the participation of young people, municipal and regional youth councils should also be established. This would ensure the support of local youth organisations and encourage their creation.
- **The Youth Forum asks that a framework for the regular consultation of young people to be created for policy making at local, regional, national and European level.** This framework could comprise of existing representative youth structures, such as National Youth Councils and INGYOs. These representative structures should be as 'youth-friendly' as possible to ensure that they encourage rather than discourage youth participation.

²⁰ Policy Paper on 'The Independence of National Youth Councils' adopted by the European Youth Forum Council of Members, Athens, Greece, 15-17 November 2001.

- **The Youth Forum urges the bodies responsible for education policy in the different countries to promote the creation of and safeguard independent school councils where pupils can participate in the decision-making bodies that effect their daily lives.** Governments and local authorities should support these councils and ensure that students have a real influence over all aspects of educational life. All pupils and students should have real influence and power over their individual learning process.
- **Work experience in NGOs should also be encouraged for secondary school pupils.** Greater links should be created between formal and non-formal education, between schools and their local community.
- **The Youth Forum urges national governments and the education authorities in decentralised states to ensure that citizenship education is a compulsory part and effectively implemented part of the curriculum in all schools for all pupils.** Unfortunately, citizenship education still is not a compulsory subject in all secondary schools in Europe. Many pupils finish their compulsory education without a basic understanding of how the political institutions of their country function. Civics is often considered as an optional extra but not as an essential part of the curriculum.

The European Union

- **The Youth Forum invites the EU to ensure that special provisions are made for young people in further policies on governance.** The White Paper on Governance aims to open up policy-making to ensure that more people and organisations are involved in shaping and delivering EU policy. It promotes greater openness, accountability and responsibility for all those involved. As this is a key EU policy paper in promoting European citizenship young people should be considered in it.
- **The Youth Forum urges the EU to ensure that young people are increasingly represented in decision-making bodies throughout the European Union.** Political parties should actively promote young candidates for seats in elections to the European Parliament. The European Economic and Social Committee should include representatives of youth civil society organisations.
- **The Youth Forum invites the European Commission to increase the amount of money available under the Youth Program and especially the EVS programme to ensure that as many young people as possible can benefit from it.** It also urges the Commission to make greater **efforts to promote the programme so that all young people are aware of the possibility to take part.** Voluntary service is one of the best means of promoting active citizenship since it encourages young people to contribute to the society in which they live.
- **The Youth Forum urges the EU to increase the budget for the support of International Non-governmental Youth Organisations to 3 million Euro by the end of the current European Parliament mandate to allow youth organisations to remain viable in order to expand their services to a larger number of young**

people. As we have already seen, youth organisations make an invaluable contribution to the non-formal citizenship education for young people, but they require the resources to play such a role.

- **The Youth Forum invites the EU to take measures to improve the access of young people and youth organisations to Community programmes.** Given the success of the EU Socrates programme in promoting European citizenship and the wide spectrum of young people it effects, the Youth Forum invites the EU to introduce courses on 'Citizenship in Europe' for all participating students before they take part in their exchange. The Youth Forum also urges the EU to include young people in the decision-making structures employed for implementing and designing these programmes.
- **The Youth Forum invites the Information Office of the European Parliament and the European Commission to establish closer relations with the Member States, with National Youth Councils as well as with local, national and regional youth organisations.** This is to ensure that young people feel that the institutions are not merely far away in Brussels but close to their home.

Council of Europe

- **The Youth Forum recommends that the Council of Europe give higher priority to its Education for Democratic Citizenship project and that it pursues this project as a long-term project for the future.** The Youth Forum urges that the Council facilitate exchange in each of its member states between governmental and non-governmental bodies on their experiences. The Youth Forum supports the EDC project since it plays a vital role in bringing together experts in the field and in exploring citizenship concepts, skills and competencies, learning strategies and grassroots practices and hopes that they will be transferred through its follow-up activities from 2002 to 2004 which aim to transfer the results of the first project into policies and practices. **The Youth Forum also urges the Council of Europe to ensure the wide dissemination of the results of this project.**
- **The Youth Forum recommends that the Council of Europe use its pool of trainers in the field of youth to organise training seminars for civics teachers.** In order to reduce travel costs for such courses, a pool of trainers could be created from the Member States so that training courses could be held in each country.
- **The Youth Forum also recommends that the Council of Europe continue to provide language courses for youth workers.** Youth leaders need to be able to speak foreign languages to incorporate the European dimension better into their work, to help promote greater mobility at European level and by so doing, European citizenship. Therefore, the Youth Forum invites the Council to increase the numbers of language courses on offer for youth trainers.

UNESCO

- **The European Youth Forum invites UNESCO to extend the Council of Europe Education for Democratic Citizenship project to a global level. It also urges UNESCO to develop further its activities in civics education.** The Youth Forum supports the trans-disciplinary project 'Education for a Sustainable Future' and its objectives to promote values and ethics through education at different levels in order to make an impact on people's lifestyles and behaviour and help to build a sustainable future. The Youth Forum urges UNESCO to continue its work in this field and build on the success of this and other citizenship projects.