“Democracy in Crisis: The Dynamics of Civic Protest and Civic Resistance”

Key theme: „Youth Activism“

Youth Social Participation: Learning Context, Challenges and Opportunities
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Introduction

In the context of the multiple crisis on the global level (democratic, economic, environmental) young people have actively shown their interest and motivation in changing the situation by getting involved in youth movements as Indignados and Occupy Wall Street, and by being active through other forms of social participation. Starting with the analysis and comparison of different concepts used in the field of youth active engagement in society, what led to the decision of focussing on ‘youth social participation’, the article examines after why youth are important and why should we focus on youth when working on the field of social participation. A short background on important international documents that mainstream training and education as means to learn how to participate is given and afterwards we explore the importance of having relevant and safe contexts where young people can learn and develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes/values and competences necessary for youth social participation. The research methodology adopted is based on the analysis of a case study about a European youth project – Youth Protagonists of Change – aimed to boost youth social participation. The study case is analysed according with three dimensions: the pedagogical principals, the learning achievements in terms of competences to participate, and the results and process in terms of meaningful participation. Therefore, the article concentrates on non-formal education as an appropriate learning context to support and boost meaningfully youth social participation, exploring the various pedagogical dimensions of non-formal education and what is in practice ‘meaningful youth participation’. Likewise the article looks at the challenges and opportunities of youth social participation, again based on the study case, identifying five main categories of obstacles and two core protective factors. One of the main obstacles is explored from a human rights perspective. Based on the analysis of the mentioned aspects main conclusions are drafted on how to develop educational projects that stimulate meaningful youth social participation. The added value of the paper for youth
workers and trainers active in the field of youth participation resides in its contribution to a better understanding of youth social participation in terms of its challenges and opportunities and in the identification of a learning context where young people can learn and develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes/values and competences necessary to actively engage in finding potential solutions and alternative courses of action for the current crisis situation and issues.

*Exploring the concepts of youth activism and youth participation*

During the preparatory phase previous to the elaboration of this article it was noticed that different nomenclature is used to refer to the active engagement of youth in society, namely ‘youth activism’ and ‘active participation’. Bibliographical research using the term ‘youth activism’ led to many references to the topic and most of them are straight connected to the United States of America (hereby USA) context. However this phenomenon is not limited to the USA. In Europe¹ and other regions of the world youth activism is a growing phenomenon. In our daily practice as youth workers and youth trainers working with young people in the European context the terminology used to refer to youth activism is ‘youth participation’. In order to ensure that both terminologies referred to the same concept we compared them based on a bibliographic research:

“Youth activism refers to activities of youth voice engaged in community organizing for social change. Youth activists are engaged in activism as planners, researchers, teachers, evaluators, social workers, decision-makers, advocates and leading actors in the environmental movement, and social justice organizations.” (Checkoway, Barry & Gutierrez 2006: 3)

This definition emphasises the aim of youth activism, which is oriented to social change, describing a variety of roles young people may take while working in their community to reach this goal. Youth participation on the other hand is defined as:

“Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engaging in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.” (Preamble of the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life 2003: 7)

¹ During the paper any reference to Europe refers to the 47 member states of the Council of Europe:
http://www.coe.int.
This definition of youth participation is slightly broader than the definition of youth activism, thus embracing the first as well. It emphasises different spheres of participation (economic, political, social, cultural) and gives at the same time hints on the concept of participation as a right that needs certain conditions to occur (means, space, opportunities, support). Thus, while youth activism mostly refers to social participation with an emphasis on social change, active participation is a wider concept that comprises other spheres.

Therefore in the framework of this paper we opted to use the terminology of ‘youth participation’ instead of youth activism. This decision is reinforced by the fact that the professional practice we refer to in this article is contextualised in Europe where, as already mentioned, the shared terminology of youth participation is used. Furthermore, we will focus on the social dimension of youth participation, which is the closest one to youth activism: “[social participation]relates to involvement in the life of a local community, addressing local problems and challenges” (in United Nations Youth Agenda, Empowering youth for development and peace quoted in Goździk-Ormel 2008: 15).

Youth social participation can have a variety of forms: volunteering work, awareness raising campaigns, educational projects, participation in youth NGOs, peer education, between other (Goździk-Ormel 2008: 25). It is characterised by a social dimension aimed to foster equality and social justice. Youth can fulfil many roles when engaged in social participation: they can initiate, plan and implement an action, fulfilling a role as decision-makers, networkers, educators, etc., and they can also take part in action initiated by others (most of the times adults) actively participating in the activities but not necessarily taking decisions. Both forms are equally valid and relevant and they lead to different achievements for young people.

One further aspect that guided our decision of choosing the terminology of youth social participation is that this approach strongly emphasis the idea of participation as a human right, being shared both by the United Nations and the Council of Europe. The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948) underlines that participation is a fundamental right of all human beings (see articles 20 and 21, the first on social participation and the second on political participation) while for the Council of Europe youth participation is perceived as “the right of young people to be included and to assume duties and responsibilities in daily life at local level as well as the right to influence the processes of their lives democratically” (Boukobza 1998: 10). The fact that youth participation is perceived as a right entails the principle/value of non-discrimination and equality. Hence, it is a universal right to which all young people are
entitled without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Why youth are important?

Youth have been defined in different ways by diverse institutions, especially in regard of the age range during which a person can be called a young person. In this paper we opted for the definition used by the European Commission in the Youth Report issued in 2009: “the passage from a dependant childhood to independent adulthood” (EU Youth Report 2009: 7). This definition is not determining an age range during which people are considered to be a young person and otherwise focus on the process of moving from one state of dependence to a more independent stage of life. We preferred it exactly because of this peculiarity that allows for a more cross-cultural application given to its flexibility.

We do believe young people are not only the future leaders but also central political/social actors throughout their youth period. Even though the general opinion on young people’s participation in democratic life is very negative nowadays (Amnå 2012: 1), this does not correspond entirely to reality. Actually what has been decreasing is the participation in elections and other traditional forms of participation (political parties, trade unions, traditional civil society organisations) (Evrard 2009: 7), given that “the current structure of representative politics lacks legitimacy in the eyes of young people” (Siurala 2000: 11). Young people search for new ways of being engaged such as “peer-to-peer networks, discussion fora, signing petitions, participation in so-called ‘new social movements’, support groups, boycotting of products, demonstrations, international meetings, using the Internet to gather information, express views or influence decision-making processes” (Goździk-Ormel 2008: 26). These findings are relevant to this article in the way they demonstrate the importance that youth social participation has nowadays as it is becoming more popular in comparison to the traditional (political) ways of participation.

But what makes youth so important in the context of social change? And hence, why are we focusing on youth and not on other age group in this article? Young people are fundamental social and political actors both in the present and in the future (Amnå 2012: 4), and they are part of a transition process in which the ways of participation in society are progressively changing. This combination of factors calls for the need to ensure that young people actually develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes / values and competences for engaging in a meaningful way in society, not only in the present but also in the future. In the next sections
of the article we explore the possibilities young people have to learn how to be active in the social sphere.

Learning how to participate

The relevance of training and education for young people to learn how to participate is emphasised on various documents issued in different years and by different institutions in Europe and worldwide. We mention only four of them, but many can be found that reinforce the importance of ‘learning to participate’.

The ‘Guanajuato Declaration’ (2010) establishes important priorities for action on young people. The article 45 of the Declaration attentionsthe importance of training and education in the field of youth participation and says: “Ensure that young people have the education, information and skills they need for their effective participation” (p. 7). The Declaration was developed in the framework of the 2010 World Youth Conference organised by Mexico Government in association with the United Nations System.

The ‘Hannover Declaration on Youth Participation’ (2005) developed in the framework of the European Conference on Youth Participation “Please do disturb!” also highlights the need to support youth participation by training and couching young people (p.2) using, among other non-formal education approaches (human rights education, experiential learning, coaching, peer education) (p. 4).

The ‘Council Resolution on Common Objectives for Participation by and Information for Young People’ (2003/C295/2004) stresses the importance of having “greater support for various forms of learning to participate” (p. 1) that should be achieved through various measures, among them “(b) encourage the development of activities in the field of non-formal and informal education that promote theactive participation of young people” (p. 3).

Finally, the ‘White Paper on Youth’ issued by the European Commission in 2001 but still an important milestone in the range of documents and reports on young people in Europe, also pinpoint the need for information, training and education of young people in order for them to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes/values and competences for participation: “Participation requires young people to acquire skills or improve existing skills. It involves a gradual learning process.” (p. 24).

In this regard we hereby give an example of an educational project aimed to foster in young people the required knowledge, skills, attitudes/values and competences for social participation.
Youth Protagonists of Change

Youth Protagonists of Change (Afonso 2011) is a European project aimed to “empower young people to promote sustainable social change and a culture of peace and human rights in their communities and at global level” (Afonso 2011: 2). The project receives financial support from the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe and lasts one year (implementation throughout 2012).

It involves directly in the first phase 26 young people aged in between 17 and 32 years (18 female and eight male from: Armenia- four participants, Estonia- three participants, Italy- four participants, Netherlands- three participants, Portugal two participants, Romania- three participants, Spain- three participants, Macedonia- three participants, Kosovo- one participant), a number still to define in the second phase (in progress) and 30 young people (participants from the same countries but in different proportion) in the last phase (November 2012).

The three main phases of the project consist of the following:

1st phase - initial training course aimed to build knowledge, skills and attitudes/values in the framework of peace and human rights education (17th-24th April 2012);
2nd phase - follow-up projects of young participants in their local communities or at European level (from May until October 2012) aimed to boost social participation and competences building;
3rd phase - conference aimed to share the results of the follow up projects, to achieve complementary knowledge, skills and attitudes/values, and to reinforce the competences already acquired (20th-25th November 2012).

Participants throughout the three phases are supposed to be the same as this permits to complete the learning cycle and build competences as the project is grounded in a competences based approach. Likewise the educational approach used in the project is non-formal education and there is a strong intercultural and active participation dimension.

The project objectives are:

1. To encourage young people to become active actors in social change processes and in creating a culture of peace and human rights.

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2 The European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe (40 years in 2012) is a foundation aimed to support young people active participation by providing financial support to youth initiatives in Europe (www.eyf.coe.int).
2. To promote in young people learning concerning issues of peace, violence and human rights.
3. To furnish young people tools and competences relevant to promote social change and a culture of peace and human rights.
4. To boost in young people attitudes and values necessary to their role as promoters of change, peace and human rights.
5. To contribute to increase the network of Young Ambassadors for Peace.
6. To foster networking and cooperation among youth NGOs worldwide.

*Non-formal education: an educational approach that supports and boost youth social participation*

As already mentioned, Youth Protagonists of Change is grounded in a non-formal education approach. We analyse now why non-formal education is one of the most efficient approaches in fostering knowledge, skills, attitudes/values and competences required for effective and meaningful youth social participation.

Non-formal education is a structured educational process guided by educational objectives. It is complementary to other educational approaches, such as formal and informal learning, and it is characterised by being learner centred, interactive and active, voluntary, accessible to all, holistic and aimed to learn life skills (Gomes, Rui 2012: 21). This educational approach is based on various pedagogical principles strongly connected with human rights. These principles are well explained in the Compass (Gomes 2012: 22-25). Therefore, here we will only offer a brief clarification on their meaning and at the same time demonstrate in which way they are present in Youth Protagonists of Change:

**Holistic learning** – means that learning takes place in a specific context and addresses all dimensions of the human being (intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual) by using a variety of methods that address the cognitive, emotional and practical aspects of learning.

**Open-ended learning** – diversity and multiplicity of opinions and visions are encouraged and hence there is not a single correct answer to a specific question but many possible one; it is related to critical thinking and free expression of the self.

**Values clarification** – awareness, expression and discussion on values is an important dimension encouraged in all non-formal educational activities.
Active participation – participants take active part in the decisions concerning their own learning and at the same time the activities proposed are interactive and require active involvement of the learner.

Co-operative learning – the importance of working together and find common goals that are beneficial to the self and the group is very important: “Co-operative learning promotes higher achievement and greater productivity, more caring, supportive, and committed relationships and greater social competence and self-esteem.” (Gomes 2012: 23).

Experiential learning – means to learn through experience; in the next section of the article this aspect is discussed in detail thus we will not describe it here.

In Youth Protagonists of Change these six pedagogical principles were treasured as respecting them creates the ground for a quality educational project that ensures to achieve meaningful youth social participation. The educational programme of the training (first phase) is based on a variety of educational activities and methods that foster learning through various channels: cognitive, emotional and practical. Examples of methods are brainstorming, small group discussions, simulations, collages, debates, video making, radio, etc. The activities / projects of participants were since the first moment grounded in their local realities, what ensured that learning was taking place in a contextualised way. Another example of this dimension is the radio workshop when young people went out to the local community to meet immigrants and local people in order to get material for the radio programme. Many of the activities are based in group work and the importance of having the entire group contributing to the final result is strongly emphasised. During group discussions and plenary sessions (sessions when the entire group sit in circle) all contributions are valorised and used for the benefit of the group. Even answers or opinions that are potentially discriminatory or racist can be used in a positive way. This does not mean however that these types of answers / opinions are accepted as correct; instead they are used by the facilitator in a way that makes the group to get a benefit. At the same time the group feels that this is a safe context to express them without being judged and excluded. This ensures that young people start to accept diversity, learn to listen to each other and realise the importance of dialogue as a way to live with diversity in a positive way.

Finally and concerning active participation, this dimension was present in the activities chosen, which always required the active involvement of participants and their decision-making, conflict resolution and problem solving skills. Moreover participants were actively involved in the evaluation of the project. The active participation dimension is of special importance for us as it ensures that participants effectively develop active participation
skills that will be later useful in real life social participation. Contrariwise it is not possible to achieve it while a learner is sitting and listening a teacher for hours and hours in a passive way and when what is to be learned is already decided, without no place for discussion or critical perspectives.

To conclude we would like to underline that the pedagogical principles described are the way to ensure an educational process that is in itself the way to learn how to participate. They lift dynamics that lead to further skills and values / attitudes of outstanding importance in social participation (and participation in general) such as critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, conflict resolution, self-expression, cooperation, acceptance of diversity, self-confidence and self-esteem, among other.

**Learning competences for social active participation**

Given that one of the main scopes of this article is to understand the learning dimension of youth social participation it is important to understand what learning is. Our preferred definition of learning is the one offered by Kolb: “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, David A. 1984: 38). According to this definition learning is a process based on experience and it comprises a variety of phases which the learner passes before completing the entire learning cycle: concrete experience (doing/having and experience), reflective observation (reviewing/reflecting on the experience), abstract conceptualisation (concluding/learning from the experience), and finally active experimentation (planning/trying out what learned) (Kolb 1984).

This conceptualisation of learning is especially relevant in the case of learning social participation competences as this nature of learning outcome is not purely theoretical and has a strong ‘acting’ dimension. As such, it needs to be practiced (learning by doing) and acted out.

Youth Protagonists of Change strongly emphasised this type of learning experience by using a variety of methods based on experiencing a certain situation (debates, small group work, simulations, role-play, etc.) and reflecting on this experience afterwards (this part of the educational process is called ‘debriefing’). Furthermore, the entire concept of the project includes the adoption of the gained knowledge, skills and values/attitudes of the first phase in practical real life situations during the second phase. This cycle is called by Kolb the experiential learning and it ensures that the knowledge, skills and values/attitudes acquired and developed initially can be transformed into competences. Competences are defined as
“the ability to apply knowledge, know-how and skills in a stable/recurring or changing situation. Two elements are crucial: applying what one knows and can do to a specific task or problem, and being able to transfer this ability between different situations.” (Taylor, Mark 2007: 41). Competences are a higher level of achievement that requires practice. Thus a competence based approach of learning needs to consider this period of practice as to allow the learner developinga competence.

Concerning the specific competences, knowledge, skills and attitudes/values necessary for young people to become active social actors at their age we would like to report here the list developed by the group of 26 young participants of Youth Protagonists of Change during the first phase of the project:

**Knowledge** - on the social context problems, about target and local communities, non-formal education tools, other specific knowledge

**Skills** - motivation skills, leadership and problem solving skills, interpersonal skills (communication, empathy), being able to connect people (networking skills), project management and organizational skills, being able to put in practice ideas and concepts (part of entrepreneurship competence), to be able and to know where to get information and how to use it (critical thinking skills), flexibility

**Attitudes / values** - realistic, optimistic, motivated, proactive, open-minded, be active and interested in what happens around, be an inspiration and encourage other young people, have a real interest in the social project carried out (faith), confidence

**Competences** - know languages (linguistic competence)

In Youth Protagonists of Change we aim to address some of the competences, knowledge, skills and attitudes / values pointed out by young people and other they did not mention. Hereby we build on the list above in order to avoid repetition:

**Knowledge** of some important concepts related with peace, nonviolence, human rights (including knowledge of the main documents that protect human rights), gender, conflict, youth participation, diversity and discrimination, role of media, intervention tools (human rights education, awareness raising, advocacy). **Skills** necessary to plan and implement follow up projects on the themes of peace and human rights: nonviolent communication and active listening, conflict analysis, cooperative skills, ability to recognise human rights violations, ability to express and understand different viewpoints, tolerance of ambiguity, gender awareness, video and audio recording skills. **Attitudes / values**: nonviolence, openness, ability to value and appreciate diversity, positive vision of the future, solidarity, expression of emotions and sense of justice. Intercultural, entrepreneurship, social and civic **competences**.
As young people acquire and develop these competences, knowledge, skills and attitudes/values they become more prepared to fulfil their role as active actors in society. We can see that the list is long and somehow related to the field of intervention. Thus as Youth Protagonists of Change focus in the field of peace and human rights much of the knowledge referred is connected with these subjects. On the other hand the skills and attitudes/values are more transversal and most of them fall under the category of the so called ‘life skills’, but not only as we also have the skills related with project management and leadership, or motivation. The competences are the ‘sum’ of all the knowledge, skills and values/attitudes.

Meaningful youth social participation

The possibility to engage in meaningful social participation is determined by a successful learning process even though different other factors also play an important role in the process. Meaningful youth social participation is characterised by its results in terms of the impact of the activity/project in which young people engage and also by the process that take to such results.

Results of youth social participation should be measured specifically in terms of the achievement of the objectives of the activity/project implemented by young people and also on the accomplishments for young people (and adults if those have been involved). Moreover results need to be in line with the definition of youth participation reported in the first part of the article. The definition emphasises that results of youth participation have to be positive and fruitful for society and ultimately need to contribute to build a “better society”.

In Youth Protagonists of Change the results of the activities/projects done by young people still have to be measured after they finalise it, hence a full evaluation process will be carried out at the end of the second phase in order to measure results and be able to understand the real impact in society and in young people themselves. Table 1 describes the results of youth participation that young people in Youth Protagonists of Change expect to attain at the end of their projects:

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3Table 1 is the result of a brainstorming about the benefits and difficulties to youth participation during the first phase of the project. To enrich the article we choose to include also the difficulties identified by participants.
The results / benefits of participation brainstormed by young people can be clustered in four main categories: learning and access to information, access to new opportunities, being heard and contribute to social change. According with literature (Goździk-Ormel 2008: 16-18) these are among the most important outcomes of youth participation.

Concerning the process that ensures a meaningful social participation it is worthwhile to mention Roger Hart’s ‘ladder of children’s participation’ (Hart, Roger 1992), which illustrates the different degrees of involvement of children and young people in projects, organisations or communities. The ladder defines eight degrees of youth involvement (each one corresponding to one rung of the ladder) from non-participation (the first three levels), passing through information and consultation (levels four and five) until youth leadership, youth-adult partnership and shared decision-making (levels six to eight).

Looking at Youth Protagonists of Change from the perspective of Hart’s ladder of youth participation we can identify three different levels of participation – five, seven and eight – which are considered to be true participation:

Rung 5: Projects are initiated and run by adults, but young people provide advice and suggestions and are informed how these suggestions contribute to the final decisions or results (Hart 1992: 12). Youth Protagonists of Change was ideated, planned and prepared by young adults working in four different NGOs in Europe. However the whole process of
implementation of the first phase was actively involving young participants by ensuring interactive and learner-centred activities and methods, by listening to their needs and suggestions on the educational process and by making them active actors in the evaluation stage. This same approach will be used in the third phase of the project.

Rung 7: Young people lead and initiate projects and adults may be invited to participate, share decision-making and provide support (Hart 1992: 14). This is valid for those young participants who are planning and implementing their projects without support from adults or young adults.

Rung 8: Projects or ideas are initiated by young people, who invite the adults to take part in the decision-making process as partners (Hart 1992: 14). This is valid for those young participants who planned their projects autonomously and are implementing them with support from adults or young adults in their reference NGOs4.

This mixture of levels of participation is adequate to the project and the objectives established at the beginning (see project description). There is not only one single way of involving young people and the best approach is defined by the group of young people and their previous engagement in social participation and well as by “the local situation, on what needs to be achieved, what experience exists, etc.” (Goździk-Ormel 2008: 15).

To conclude this section we can say that Youth Protagonists of Change is generating the necessary conditions for youth social participation, especially from the point of view of the process. Relatively to the results it is not yet possible to furnish exact data, even though young participants are in most of the cases engaged in their follow up projects what is per se a pre-condition of positive results.

Challenges and opportunities to youth social participation: analysis of empirical data from Youth Protagonists of Change

As already said participants in Youth Protagonists of Change have to implement follow up projects where they can put in practice the knowledge, skills and values/attitudes learned in the first phase of training thus developing their competences and increasing their level of confidence and self-esteem. During the training participants had the time (sessions in the programme were dedicated to this) and resources (session on project management, support

4 In the article the ‘reference NGOs’ are the partner organisations in the project who engaged the participants to attend the project and that have the role to support them, whenever necessary, in their follow up projects.
from leading team, international group of partners) to elaborate a project idea that would be related with the project themes and at the same with their local reality thus corresponding to real needs. After an initial reflection on the main human rights issues in their countries, participants had to decide a focus for their projects and finally develop a project draft proposal. The projects they come up with were eight, some local and some international, on themes connected with human rights education, youth participation and non-discrimination (see Table 3 below for details).

These projects represent a real opportunity of social participation and when asked in the final evaluation questionnaire what were the possible obstacles that could impede the implementation of the projects young people answered with various motivations that we clustered in five main categories:

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Answers from young participants on ‘perceived obstacles’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External factors</td>
<td>The schools may reject our project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not enough funding (two participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of enthusiasm by the public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal factors related with study or work</td>
<td>Organisational problems in my personal life that constrain me to change city</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dissertation writing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in my personal life</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upcoming of new engagement (i.e. work)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncertainty about my future (career, residence, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of time (two participants)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivational factors</td>
<td>Losing motivation (two participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project management related problems</td>
<td>Lack of people</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Misunderstandings with the partners / Lack of communication with other members of the project</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of time compatibility among team members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capacity building</td>
<td>Management (because some of the participants didn’t have the opportunity to manage a project before)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 below shows the main results on the ‘real obstacles’ that hindered projects’ implementation or that are delaying it and the protective factors that facilitated the project implementation. Afterward the table we analyse in detail the various factors, perceived and real, as both are useful to increase our understanding on youth social participation issues and dynamics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>Real obstacles</th>
<th>Protective factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| International training course on media and its role in international relations directed to students of journalism | *Not implemented*  
Given to study and work commitments |                                                                                   |
| Movie competition on human rights targeted at young people               | *Not implemented*  
Participants moved city to study / work  
Lack of availability from team members decreased the motivation of other participants | Given to the support and motivation provided by the reference NGO the project transformed in a new one and is being implemented by a new participant |
| Citizenship education project with children in schools                   | *In the preparation phase*  
Given to changes in school system participants had to find another school | Motivation level of participants as well as their level of competence |
| Movie on Sicily and Armenia with a focus on human rights issues          |                                                                                   | *In progress*  
Motivation level of participant and his level of competence |
| Flash mob activity against segregation of cultural groups               | *Not implemented*  
Given to work commitments | Participants will be involved in a worldwide conference on peace-building that the reference NGO is organising |
| Project aimed to promote youth participation in general                  | *In the preparation phase*  
Given to study and Summer period the project was postponed to September 2012 | Participants mentioned the experience of the NGO as one safety factor on the good quality of their project; they also mention an alternative project if the first one will not be developed |
| Project on communication with disabled young people and their families   | *No updates until now* |                                                                                   |
| Living library against discrimination based on sexual orientation and cultural background |                                                                                   | *Implemented*  
The project was carried out in the context of the volunteering experience of the participant in the reference NGO and had its full support |

Most of the perceived obstacles referred by young people are related with **personal factors connected with study or work**, there were seven out of 19 answers falling in this category.
Indeed the real obstacle that hindered or delayed projects’ implementation in a greater extent was this: four out of five non-implemented / delayed projects were affected by this factor. This situation is not new to us as in our professional experience in the previous eight years factors related with study and work were influencing to a great extent the participation of young people in projects of this nature and in other volunteering activities. Study, part-time jobs and the opportunity to get a job (being it the first job or a job found after long time precariousness and/or unemployment) are determining to a great extent the participation of young people in the social sphere. As young people grow, they understand the need to find a place in the world, meaning to get a job and becoming independent. This start to be evident more and more in an early age, at least in European society, and young people in high school and even before are aware of the importance to get a job in order to have a fulfilling life. This way they feel a great pressure to study, avoiding dedicating time and energy to other aspects of life, such as social participation.

It is worthwhile to look at these findings considering the age factor as well. As all participants are over 18, an age in which changes in life are more likely than when young people are under 18, they are more prone to be subject to events that can hinder the fulfilment of their right and duty as social actors, at least in the context of the project. The realisation of this aspect can be a hint that guides the choice of the age range of participants for future projects. With this we do not mean that young people over 18 are not available to participate, but that there are more challenges to be addressed when considering their participation.

Concerning the external factors mentioned by the participants they appear both as a perceived and a real obstacle. Nevertheless the group of young people developing the project on citizenship education in the schools is already overcoming the external factor presented and they are looking for a new school, which demonstrates motivation and engagement as well as a certain level of competence. The conclusion we extract from this is that even external factors are not totally out of control, thus if a school reject a project, if the funding is not enough or available, or there is a lack of interest from the target, it is always possible to understand the reason behind and improve. This requires from young people knowledge, skills, attitudes / values and competences, such as working with the community to understand their needs, being able to write a project and understand available funding opportunities, fundraising, active listening and conflict resolution skills, as well as the motivation to overcome problems. It is the role of those who support young people to underline this and to ensure they acquire the relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes / values and competences to overcome the obstacles.
External factors can undermine motivation, which is one of the most important aspects to be considered when working in the framework of youth social participation. In table 3 it is mentioned that the movie competition project was not implemented given to study / work commitments and to organizational problems related with the project, that generated demotivation. This set of factors could be challenged because the reference NGO continue to insist with the last participant on the importance of finding an alternative project. The NGO was trying as much as possible to motivate this participant (that drop out after) to develop an alternative idea that is now being implemented by another young person.

To understand the motivation of young people is crucial; in the project Youth Protagonists of Change this motivation already existed as young participants knew what the project was about and they choose to take part on it. But their individual motivations were different as motivations across a group can change a lot and being aware of them help to ensure they are kept in a high level. Furthermore it is not possible to assume that initial motivation will be maintained throughout a project lifetime, it is important to work on it in a regular way and with appropriate tools. Motivational factors can be kept high by young people themselves or with the support of those who work in partnership with them (youth-adult partnerships). In Youth protagonists of Change this role is fulfilled by the reference NGOs.

Apart from the external factors also project management related problems have an influence on motivation. As described in the previous paragraphs the project on the movie competition was extremely influenced by this factor: lack of people and lack of time compatibility among team members generated demotivation. Ideally social participation projects are not to be developed alone because it is not realistic from a practical point of view (need to do many tasks and need for a variety of competences often not available in one single person) and as we can see also for factors connected with motivation.

Additionally human relations in project management are of extreme importance and especially working with young people the human aspect needs to be considered. Young people develop more probable a project with their friends and/or someone they know than with someone they never saw before and with whom they have no relationship. Prove of this is the fact that in Youth Protagonists of Change most projects were developed in partnerships of participants that during the training nurtured a friendly relationship. For this reason it is important to boost in young people communication skills, conflict resolution skills and the

5 In Youth Protagonists of Change the individual motivations of young people were mostly related with learning, making new friends, discovering a new culture, etc. These motivations were collected the first day of work through an activity specifically aimed at understanding participants’ expectations/motivations and fears.
values related with diversity and openness, which permit them to deal with human relations in the framework of their projects. Furthermore if the project involve a youth-adult partnership it is crucial that both young people and adults are able to engage in a positive cooperation and that adults do not fall in the traps of taking the floor to young people, do all the decision-making, prejudice and patronise / tokenise young people.

Finally and regarding the capacity building dimension, for young people in the group this aspect seems not to be a very important one as it was mentioned once in 19 answers to the question. It didn’t appear as a real obstacle either. It can be that young people feel more prepared after the training to go to the field and implement a project. This is particularly relevant to the Youth protagonists of Change, especially because the first phase of the project was aimed to capacity building of the participants.

There are many other factors that influence youth participation in general and youth social participation in particular, however is not our goal to analyse all of them in this article. For a more complete list it is possible to consult the manual ‘Have your say!’ (Goździk-Ormel 2008: 19) referred in the bibliography.

To conclude this section we would like to mention the protective factors that seems to be more present in the follow up phase of the project: the support from NGOs and the motivation. It seems obvious from the results that young people who can rely in the support of an NGO have increased probability to engage in the implementation of the follow up project. In this youth-adult partnership NGOs can provide to young people, whenever necessary, the resources, motivation and support for them to implement their ideas. NGOs have qualified staff that can work side by side with young people as equal and they can provide technical skills, for example in project management, that young people usually lack, at least in their first steps in the field of social projects and activities. However this does not mean that young people participation in a more autonomous way is not meaningful, all depends in the situation as was said before in the article.

In relation to motivation its value as a protective factor is given by its determining role in the dynamics of social participation. As we could see from the analysis of the obstacles, motivation is a very sensitive aspect easily influenced by all the other factors and often it was present in the dynamics that took to drop out or non-implementation of projects. At the same time it was present in many cases of project implementation.
The present crisis is having several consequences at all levels of society, among them high rates of unemployment and especially youth unemployment⁶. In this context young people cannot loose the chance of a new job when it arises, even if that means to withdrawal other commitments. When these commitments are voluntary, as in the case of social participation, the decision to dismiss these commitments is even easier as there are not, at least apparently, any constraints to continue. The same is valid for studies, as soon as an exam is close young people ‘forget’ about anything else and close at home studying.

Looking at this from a human rights perspective it is like as the so-called second generation rights – social, economic and cultural rights (Gomes 2012: 387) – had become more important in relation to the civic and political rights (first generation rights) (Gomes 2012: 386). Social, economic and cultural rights embrace all rights related with basic human needs such as access to clean water, food, shelter and health, access to education and work, among other. On the other hand civic and political rights are related with the right to actively participate in the community life (social and political participation), among many other, all under the umbrella of limiting State power and safeguarding individuals from abuse of power from the State. Saying so it is clear that this first generation of rights in equally important as the second generation. Furthermore the possibility to participate in social and political life is decisive to have other rights fulfilled. Thus it is necessary to ensure that young people avoid the trap of the modern life system that is always telling them that money is the most important thing and therefore the possibility to have a job is the only one that counts, don’t matter to which cost.

We are not saying either that civic and political rights are the most important; human rights are all interrelated and are interdepended, and the violation of one right takes to many other right’s violations. We are saying that young people need to be more aware about all these aspects, thus learning them as important instruments to fight for their rights and also to be enough sensitive, empathic and solidarity about what is going on around. Not only on issues that directly regard them but also issues that affect human beings in their local community, country and even worldwide. More importantly, the ability to be sensitive and be able to recognise human rights violations and problems in the community has to be complemented

⁶ See OECD website for detailed data: [http://www.oecd.org/employment/youth](http://www.oecd.org/employment/youth)
with the ability to act to contribute to tackle the problems identified and work towards human
dignity, peace and justice.

Final conclusions and recommendations

Through the study case it was possible to grasp the subject of youth social participation and
have a greater understanding of it, especially concerning the themes proposed by the article:
the learning context and the challenges and opportunities.
Youth Protagonists of Change is a very good example of how non-formal education
programmes oriented to young people can achieve and develop knowledge, skills,
attitudes/values and competences relevant for youth social participation. Still these types of
projects need to respect some quality criteria as to ensure meaningful results: 1) be developed
according with the pedagogical principles of non-formal education (holistic learning, open-
ended learning, values clarification, participation, co-operative learning, experiential learning,
learner centredness), 2) ensure there is a competences based approach put in place so that
young people develop relevant competences and 3) allow enough time for the process as
working on competences needs time, 4) ensure young people’s needs and voice is heard and
have a real influence in the project, 5) keep in mind the various challenges to youth
participation and monitor the project based on them ensuring that they are dealt with and
solutions are found.

Through the analysis of the various obstacles (perceived and real) and the protective factors it
was possible to understand that there are many risk factors that should be taken in
consideration while working with youth in social participation projects: external factors,
factors related with study / work, motivational factors, project management related problems
and capacity building. The central role of motivation was acknowledged and it was evident
that in this type of project NGOs support is an important protective factor what shows that
youth-adult partnerships are of great value if well developed.

As a message for the future we would like to underline the importance of helping young
people to understand the relevance of youth social participation to develop competences that
increase employability, what probably would increase their interest on the subject. It could be
interesting as well to create mutual responsibility agreements when young people are involved
in a voluntary basis in an activity, constructing this way the commitment aspect that
sometimes lack in volunteering activities of this kind. Equally important is to foster a human
rights approach to youth social participation, helping young people (and adults) to understand the right-duty dimension embedded on it.

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