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NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND YOUTH
ORGANISATIONS: THE FUTURE OF THE EU

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STRATEGIES AND POLICIES ON YOUTH IN THE EU

**Non-formal education and Youth Organizations: The Future of
the EU**

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Abstract

This working paper analyses the importance of youth organisations focused on non-formal education in the European Union and its member states. Non-formal education has played a significant role in the past years, being one of the pillars of promoting youth engagement in a wide variety of issues, including but not limited to environmental issues like climate change, political participation, societal issues like the role of women in society and the treatment of refugees. This paper analyses the impact youth organisations have in educating the European youth through non-formal education, the policies that are implemented by the European Union in order to support their work, as well as what else must be done in order for their work to continue having a positive impact in the EU, through legislative procedures, as well as other initiatives.

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Introduction

In recent years, talks concerning non-formal education have become more and more frequent in discussions, ranging from seminars to international conferences. What was once believed to be inconsequential, has now evolved into an aspect of business strategies for multimillion dollar corporations and has been the focus of governmental policies all around the world, especially in Europe and the European Union. One of the largest promoters of non-formal education has been civil society, and to be more specific, youth organisations. This is due to the fact that non-formal education has had a significant role in the education of the public, especially the youth, on many issues, ranging from the environment, to democratic participation, the inequalities present in our societies, and many other societal issues concerning the youth of today.

The importance of non-formal education and youth organisations can not be underestimated. In recent years, Europe is facing multiple crisis, including but not limited to, the Russian-Ukrainian war, the rise in authoritarian governments in Eastern Europe, the rise of far-right movements in European nations and the rise of anti-EU sentiments as a result of Brexit. In order for the European Union to survive through all these crises and continue its path towards strengthening and making Europe more independent, it must focus on its future generations of citizens, who will have to carry forward this Union into the future. It is for this reason that non-formal education and youth organisations are such an important aspect of the EU, since the role they have in not only educating the European youth on important issues, but also being able to motivate them into actively participating in public affairs, is one that can greatly benefit the EU towards its difficult path into the future.

This working paper will analyse what is non-formal education and youth organisations, it will review recent Regulations of the European Union and Recommendations of the Council of Europe concerning non-formal education and youth organisations, it will review the impact that youth organisations have had in Europe in recent years, analyzing specific organisations, and finally it will suggest what can be done next in order to further develop non-formal education and youth organisations as pillars of youth participation and democracy in Europe.

Definitions

Non-Formal Education:

According to a definition by the Council of Europe, non-formal education refers to planned and structured programmes, as well as processes of personal and social education for young people, with the goal of further developing their skills and competences, outside of the formal school curriculum. Non-formal education is utilised mostly by youth organisations, and should be accessible to all, voluntary, organised, participatory, focused on life skills and preparing young people to be active citizens, holistic etc (*Definitions - European Youth Foundation - www.coe.int*). Non-formal educations should not be confused with informal

education, which is a lifelong learning process where individuals develop skills and knowledges from everyday experiences and their environment (*Definitions - European Youth Foundation - www.coe.int*).

Youth Organisation:

Youth organisations can differ from country to country, however they are generally understood as organisations that are youth-led and focused, non-profit, voluntary and non-governmental, although they can also be part of a state apparatus. They usually have an established political, social, cultural, or economic goal they are aiming to promote for and with their members. This is achieved through activities for young people and/or by engaging in youth advocacy. These organisations usually focus on promoting democratic ideas and social rights, making their members more involved in participating socially and politically, as well as being a place for young people to develop their personal and social skills through leisure, voluntarism and non-formal education (*Youth organisations and youth programmes - Youth Partnership*). They also vary in size, with some being local organisations, and others having a membership in the millions, as well as being active in a wide variety of issues, from environmental issues to student representation in a university.

European Youth Foundation:

The European Youth Foundation (henceforth EYF) is a fund that was established in 1972 by the Council of Europe with the goal of providing financial and educational support for European youth activities. Youth NGOs can apply to the Foundation only if they are from the 46 Council of Europe member states, as well as Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Holy See, and the Russian Federation. It is part of the Youth Department of the Council of Europe Directorate of Democratic Participation, with an annual budget of 3.8 million Euros, having supported more than 300.000 young people through its activities. It aims to make young people heard at top decision making levels, to support European youth NGOs, and to promote peace, understanding and respect (*The European Youth Foundation at a glance - European Youth Foundation - www.coe.int*).

European Youth Forum:

The European Youth Forum (henceforth YFJ) is the platform for youth organisations in Europe, representing over 100 youth organisations, bringing together tens of millions of young people. The Youth Forum works to empower young people to participate actively in society in order to improve their lives by representing and advocating for their needs and interests, as well as those of the organisations represented in the Forum. The European Youth Forum is funded by the EYF, the Council of Europe, and the European Union through the Erasmus+ programme (*about us | European Youth Forum*).

World Organisation of the Scout Movement:

The World Organisation of the Scout Movement (henceforth WOSM) is the largest scouting organisation, as well as one of the largest youth organisations in the world, with 173-member national scout organisations, with a membership of 57 million young people involved in scouting. WOSM was established in 1922 and has its operational headquarters in Malaysia and is legally based in Switzerland (*World Organization of the Scout Movement | World Organization of the Scout Movement*). WOSM represents young people all over the world, having a general consultative status to the United Nations in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), is a full member of the YFJ, as well as being represented in the European Union and international organisations such as the World Health Organisation. In Europe, WOSM represents over 2 million members with 40 national organisations being present in the region, focusing on non-formal education, social inclusion, democratic participation, climate change and sustainable development, and youth advocacy (*World Organization of the Scout Movement - Bureau Européen du Scoutisme | lobbyfacts*).

World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts:

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (henceforth WAGGGS) is the largest voluntary movement dedicated to girls and young women in the world representing over 8.9 million girls and young women in 152 countries (*Who we are, WAGGGS*). The movement shares most of its history with WOSM, both being created by Sir Robert Baden Powell, with WAGGGS being formed in 1928 and having its headquarters in the United Kingdom. Like WOSM, WAGGGS is a full member of the YFJ and has the same status as WOSM in the ECOSOC committee of the UN. Unlike WOSM where both men and women, WAGGGS accepts only women,¹ with its main goal being to enable girls and young women to reach their potential as responsible citizens of the world. WAGGGS has a variety of programmes that are aimed at the empowerment of young women, promoting women rights, and promoting equality between men and women in society at large.

Big 6 Youth Organisations:

Formed in 1996, it’s an alliance formed by the Big 6 leading international youth-serving organisations, which include the: World Alliance of Young Men’s Christians Associations (henceforth World YMCA), World Young Women’s Christian Association (henceforth World YWCA), WOSM, WAGGGS, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and The Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award Foundation (*‘Rio-Declaration-on-Non-Formal-Education’*, 2019).

¹ With some exceptions, either because the males are enrolled in WOSM and the females in WAGGGS, or in the case of the Greek Guiding Association both women and men are enrolled in WAGGGS

1. Existing policies on Youth Organisations and Non-Formal education

In order to be able to truly comprehend how non-formal education and youth organisations have been operating in the European Union and in Europe at large, we must understand how Member States are approaching their youth. In their Journal article titled «Youth Policies in Europe: Towards a Classification of Different Tendencies in Youth Policies in the European Union» by Claire Wallace and Rene Bendit, youth policies are classified into four categories, regarding how countries “imagine” their youth: as a resource, as a problem, as vulnerable, and a centralised view of youth (Wallace and Bendit, 2009). Nordic countries often view their youth as a resource, which as a result leads to youth policies that focus on helping young people develop their skills either for themselves or for the benefit of society as a whole, with an emphasis on education, training, and youth participation. In the United Kingdom and Ireland youth is mostly viewed as a problem, there is a focus on preventing issues like drug abuse, unemployment, STDs, and youth delinquency. As a result, youth policy in these nations often focuses on crime prevention and is often discussed in the context of social exclusion. Finally, there are two categories in between those two extremes, those that view young people as vulnerable, with mostly Central European countries and France following that approach, and a centralised approach, with most Mediterranean nations following this approach. In both of these approaches youth in general is viewed as a resource, with certain groups of youth being identified as problems, or as having problems. In the vulnerable approach it’s because youth encompasses a very wide age group, including children, which leads to an approach of children being in need of protection, and older young people being viewed as a resource as they age (Wallace and Bendit, 2009).

From 1994 onwards, we can notice a trend of “Europeanisation” of youth policies, with both the European Commission and the Council of Europe focusing on youth policies, developing programmes simultaneously (Wallace and Bendit, 2009). This trend began in 1988 when the European Commission published a memorandum examining the feasibility of the existence of a European Youth Policy, and was later followed by the Recommendation No. (97) 3 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on youth participation and the future of civil society (‘RECOMMENDATION No. R (97) 3 OF THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS TO MEMBER STATES ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND THE FUTURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY’, 1997), in which the committee recognises the importance of youth organisations in civil society and urges nations to collaborate with them, and also suggests the creation of a European scheme for young people, which later involved into the EYF and YFJ. It could also be considered a precursor to the focus on non-formal education, since on article I paragraph v. suggests the development of suitable training for youth workers, which could be interpreted as an early recognition of the importance of non-formal education. The Council of Europe would truly recognise the importance of non-formal education in 2000, when the Parliamentary Assembly voted Recommendation 1437 (2000), which recognises the impact of non-formal education and youth NGOs have in civil society, and it urges the

Council of Ministers to recognise non-formal education as an important factor to youth policy, to make it more accessible, and provide financial aid to non-formal education activities and organisations (‘Recommendation 1437 (2000)¹, 2000).

In recent years the European Union has continued its support of youth through its longstanding youth policies, with the most recent examples being Regulation (EU) 2021/817 establishing Erasmus+ (*Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 (Text with EEA relevance)*, 2021) and Regulation (EU) 2021/888 establishing the European Solidarity Corps programme (*Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme and repealing Regulations (EU) 2018/1475 and (EU) No 375/2014 (Text with EEA relevance)*, 2021), as well as Decision (EU) 2021/2316 on a European Year of Youth (2022) (*Decision (EU) 2021/2316 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 December 2021 on a European Year of Youth (2022) (Text with EEA relevance)*, 2021). All of those decisions are part of the EU Youth Strategy, the framework for EU youth policy for 2019-2027, based on the Council Resolution of 26 November 2018 (*EUR-Lex - C:2018:456:FULL - EN - EUR-Lex*, 2018), which establishes 11 European Youth Goals: Connecting EU with Youth, Equality of All Genders, Inclusive Societies, Information & Constructive Dialogue, Mental Health & Wellbeing, Moving Rural Youth Forward, Quality Employment for All, Quality Learning, Space and Participation for All, Sustainable Green Europe, and Youth Organisations & European Programmes (*European Youth Goals | European Youth Portal*). By analysing these documents, we can discern that the European Union has been progressively focusing more and more on its youth population, with it becoming a major part of its policy making decisions, as well as influencing decisions heavily in other sectors of lawmaking as well, most notably the environment, with its recent decision to ban the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2035 (*EU ban on sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2035 explained | News | European Parliament*, 2022). With the European elections right around the corner, the EU is focusing a lot of its resources engaging with the European youth, and goal 12 of the European Youth Goals is a recognition from the EU of the instrumental role youth organisations play in the political participation of young people in democratic processes, trying to include them more into the conversation, with recent examples being the meeting between WOSM Secretary General Ahmad Alhendawi and European Commission Directorate for International Partnerships Jutta Urpolainen to discuss youth and the Sustainable Development Goals (henceforth SDGs) (*World Scouting and EU meet to discuss youth and the SDGs | World Organization of the Scout Movement*, 2023).

Finally, it’s important to also mention certain initiatives outside of Europe, that have had an impact on how non-formal education NGOs and youth organisations have responded to the growing need for a global platform for these organisations. These are the Rio Declaration on non-formal education, a result of the World Non-Formal Education Forum convened in Rio

de Janeiro, Brazil from 9-11 December 2019, as well as the Joint Position on non-formal education from the Big 6 Youth Organisations. The World Non-Formal Education Forum responded to the need that these organisations had for a global platform in order to coordinate the efforts towards using non-formal education in order to achieve the 2030 Agenda on sustainable development, as well as recommend ways to respond to the need for more investment and recognition of non-formal education (‘Rio-Declaration-on-Non-Formal-Education, 2019). It brought together more than 400 participants from over 70 international organisations, youth organisations and UN entities, calling upon all relevant stakeholders, including the EU, to invest in the right to non-formal education, to recognise it, to invest in innovating learning techniques, increase funding for non-formal education and youth organisations, and to develop stronger partnerships with them. The Joint Position of the Big 6 Youth Organisations dwells deeper on the actions that stakeholders need to address, as well as explaining in much greater detail the benefits and necessity of non-formal education and youth organisations in civil society (‘Joint Position on Non Formal Education’, 2019).

2. Impact of Youth Organizations in Youth Participation

Youth Organisations have always played an important part in social change and political engagement, especially after the fall of the USSR and the establishment of democracies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese in their article « ‘Rocking the vote’: new forms of youth organisations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union», explore the relationship between the youth movements created in Georgia and Ukraine and the colour revolution, suggesting that these revolutions were boosted by the political opportunities for youth movements. In the article, they analyse the ‘It’s time’ movement in Ukraine in 2004 and the Rose Revolution in Georgia, a result of protests which overcame the electoral falsification in Georgia in 2003. Both of these movements were organised by youth organisations, in the case of Georgia it was Kmara, and they highlight their true impact of youth organisations in the political landscape, showcasing their ability to organise and target the youth in order to lobby and fight in order to protect their rights and democracy (Ó Beacháin and Polese, 2010).

There are three recent examples that will be discussed concerning the impact youth organisations have in civil society in Europe, analysing what their impact was in European society at large. The first case is the very recent ending to unpaid internships by the YFJ. In 2022, the European Youth Forum began a campaign in order to ban unpaid internships in the EU, in order to protect the rights of young people to decent jobs and professional future, with a 2023 report revealing that an unpaid internship can cost a young person over €1,000 a month, deepening inequalities (‘The Cost of Unpaid Internships’, 2023). Through multiple actions in Brussels, as well as a large social media campaign, it managed to get the European Parliament to vote on a report with recommendation to the Commission on quality traineeships in the Union, with 404 votes in favour, 78 against and 130 abstentions

(*European Parliament calls for banning unpaid internships | European Youth Forum, 2023*) (Times, 2023) (European Parliament. Directorate General for Parliamentary Research Services., 2022). Now the European Commission is expected to develop and present in the near future a Directive concerning unpaid internships in the EU.

Another great example of the impact youth organisations in Europe have been the emergency response of WOSM in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Immediately after the Russian invasion, which has generated over 8 million refugees, with another 6 million having been internally displaced within the country, scouts in the European and Eurasian regions² have been, and still are, providing crucial assistance to those displaced due to the war. Apart from humanitarian action, scouting uses non-formal education in its activities in refugee camps, as well integrating hundreds of refugee children into local scout groups, making them part of the community and aiding in their integration. WOSM has collaborated with UNICEF creating the UAct project and has assisted more than 1.000.000 Ukrainians as of right now, as well as raising hundreds of euros for Ukrainian scouts through crowdfunding from scouts all over the world (*One Year On: Scouts Continue to Support Ukrainians Displaced by War | World Organization of the Scout Movement, 2023*). Scouting has also been instrumental in helping the integration of Ukrainian refugees, with many being able to find a second home thanks to the teachings of scouting and the actions taken by National Scout Organisations (henceforth NSOs), one example being the Svitlo Community Centre in Prague, run by the Czech Scouting Institute, helping 150-200 Ukrainians every day (*From Scouting to community building: Czech Scouts ease the integration of Ukrainians at Prague community centre | World Organization of the Scout Movement, 2023*).

Finally, another example of the impact youth organisations has in youth participation through non-formal education is the Girl-led Advocacy campaign of WAGGGS. Female-led advocacy has been a core part of WAGGGS’s identity, being one of the key reasons the movement was created in 1910. WAGGGS has given the opportunity to more than 100 young women to attend key global events and speak side-by-side with Heads of States and key UN officials, amplifying their voice on a global scale and advocating for gender equality, female empowerment, youth rights, gender-based violence, and climate change. WAGGGS has implanted a variety of programmes that aim to give young women a voice in European, and by extension global affairs, with campaigns like the “Stop the Violence” programme, co-created with UN Women, the Girl Led Action on Climate Change (henceforth GLACC) programme, which allowed six young women to participate in COP27, the world’s largest climate change conference (*Girl-led Advocacy, 2023*) (*International Women’s day 2023, 2023*).

² WOSM separates scouting in six regions. As of right now the European region is separate from the Eurasian region, however the Eurasian region might become part of the European region within the next year.

3. What is the next step?

From what we can see from this point, it is apparent that youth organisations and non-formal education in Europe have and will continue to have a large impact in the participation of youth in democratic processes. What can be done in order to continue this development? The EU Youth Strategy has addressed many issues that struggled youth organisations in a European level, thus what is important is for the EU to ensure that these developments that have already been achieved continue, by ensuring the success of the goals it has set. It is also important for the Union to focus on youth organisations role in encouraging young people to vote, since in 2024 we will be having the European Parliamentary elections, by collaborating with them in order to promote the importance of the European elections, and ensure that young people participate in the electoral process, in to capitalise on the increase in youth participation in the 2019 Parliamentary elections, with an increase of 14 points when compared to the 2014 EU elections (*Have the 2019 European elections entered a new dimension ?*, 2019).

Another issue that must be addressed is the role that National Youth Councils (henceforth NYC) play in the national level. The role of NYCs is inconsistent amongst member states, with some having a large role in the shaping of youth policy in their country, like the Youth Council of Romania (YCR) (*‘Who we are’*, 2023 b), and others being largely dysfunctional, like the Hellenic national Youth Council. It is imperative for the EU and its Member States to support NYCs, as well as for the EU to ensure their independence from governments. The EU needs to, in collaboration with the YFJ and the EYF, create a baseline for all NYCs in Europe, as well as to further envelop them in the decision-making processes at an EU and national level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of non-formal education and youth organisations in the European Union over the past few decades has been instrumental in its effort to connect with the youth of the Union, as well as in the huge increase of participation of young people in social and political issues. Young people over the past few years have been the ones to push for instrumental changes in our societies, and this wouldn't have been achieved if it weren't for youth organisations, as we have seen above. With the European Union placing young people, and by extension youth organisations, as one of the pillars of its expansion and development, with the EU youth policy for 2019-2027, we can expect to see a further increase in youth participation in EU affairs, as well as an increase in youth participation in youth organisations all over Europe, as well as opposition to anti-EU sentiments that are spreading all over Europe.

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