

Roundtable

Participation of Youth in Formulation of Public Policies on the Local Level – Are Institutional Mechanisms Efficient?

Roundtable “Participation of youth in formulation of public policies on the local level – Are institutional mechanisms efficient?” took place on Friday, 15 June 2012 in Zagreb within NGO Days 2012. In addition to NGO Days organizers – Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs, National Foundation for Civil Society Development and TACSO Croatia Office, roundtable host organizations were GONG and Croatian Youth Network. The objective of the roundtable was to discuss criteria and practice in participation of youth in formation of policies on the local level, based upon results of survey carried out by GONG and CYN, within context of preparation of the new National Strategy for Creation of an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, and to offer guidelines for its implementation. Introductory presentations were given by Ms. Vanja Škorić, legal advisor in GONG, Mr. Nikola Buković, programme coordinator for national and local youth policies in CYN. Roundtable moderator was Mr. Igor Bajok, Association for Civil Society Development SMART (Rijeka). In this roundtable participated approximately 20 representatives of CSOs, government bodies and youth councils.

The roundtable opened with presentation by Ms. Vanja Škorić, who provided brief overview of partial results of the research in openness and transparency of local self-government units in the Republic of Croatia (LOTUS 2011), with an emphasis on their openness towards CSOs and civil initiatives, and youth councils. Ms. Škorić pointed out that inclusion and participation of citizens in all key phases of the cycle of adoption and implementation of public policies is of great importance. This includes defining of priorities, preparation of drafts, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation or change of public policies. However, the practice demonstrates two key problems in preparation and implementation of public policies. The first problem refers to the fact that citizens are very rarely included in any of the above-mentioned phases, on the national and on the local level, whereas the second problem refers to neglecting the importance of individual cycle phases, which eventually brings into question the efficiency of public policies. Likewise, the draft National Strategy for Creation of an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development recognizes at least two key challenges concerning participation of citizens in decision-making processes. These challenges refer, on one hand, to still insufficiently stimulating legal framework and on the other, to unsatisfactory level of implementation of legal framework in practice (for example, Code of Practice on consultation with the interested public in procedures of adopting laws, other regulations and acts, especially on the local level). If citizens are not included in the first two phases of the cycle of preparation of public policies, or if they are included only to a limited extent or just to satisfy the form during the phase of

drafting and decision-making, then the very meaning of citizen participation is being missed.

Through the above-mentioned research, or one of its dimensions (collaboration with civil society) GONG attempted to estimate the openness of local and regional self-administration units towards CSOs and youth councils; in other words, to measure the readiness of local administrations to include CSOs and youth in the decision-making processes. Full results of the research are available on internet web pages of association GONG www.gong.hr, whereas Ms. Škorić particularly covered the part of the research concerning youth councils. It was determined that in the sample comprised of 509 out of the total number of 576 local and regional self-government in Croatia (121 out of total of 127 cities, 368 out of the total of 429 municipalities and 20 out of 20 counties) youth councils were active (constituted pursuant to the Law on Youth Councils and had at least one session within the last one year period) in 90% of counties, 70% of cities and 29% of municipalities. Within this number only slightly more than half (57%) of youth councils had some form of communication with a representative body of the local and regional self-government, and only 27% of representative bodies requested youth councils to comment on the issues within their purview (most often it concerned discussion/adoption of plan of activities for the youth council in the previous or the upcoming year). Ms. Škorić concluded that in view of the legal obligation to establish youth councils, the low percentage of active councils indicates deficient implementation of the Law, whereas disinterestedness of the youth in participating in this body indicated lack of sufficient information on instruments through which they might realize larger influence onto decision-making processes within their communities. Likewise, even in those local and regional self-government units that had an established cooperation with their youth councils there is a space for widening of issues that are at least discussed with youth councils, even if they are not included in the decision-making.

Discussion that ensued focused on the issue of wide disproportion in the number of active youth councils in counties compared to municipalities. The three main or most frequent reasons for this disproportionality are: misunderstanding of the purpose and work of youth councils in municipalities; lack of capacities, especially in small municipalities, for implementation of the Law (but also for creation of an enabling environment for civil society development and provision of financial support to CSOs, as regularly confirmed by reports on provided financial support to CSO projects and programs prepared by the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs; as well as disinterestedness of youth in participation in youth councils. Still, it was concluded that there is the need to implement a deeper study that would assist in full understanding of this issue. The discussion widened to the issues concerning financing of CSOs on the local level and implementation of the Code of Positive Practice, Standards and Criteria for realization of financial support for CSO programs and projects. Additionally, the possibility was pointed out for promotion and stimulation of collaboration between municipalities, which might serve as a model to improve the system of financial support provision to CSOs in smaller municipalities, and the system of participation of youth in formulation of public policies on the local level. Finally, one of roundtable participants

shared his experiences of participation in the current procedure for selection of youth council members for the City of Zagreb, which also served as an introduction to presentation by Mr. Nikola Buković.

In introductory part of his presentation, Mr. Buković reminded participants that youth councils are advisory bodies of representative bodies of local and regional self-government units, which are selected through public call for a mandate of two years. Subsequently, in parallel to implementation of LOTUS 2011 survey, GONG and CYN wished to explore, by means of comparison of results of the two surveys, what is the support that local and regional self-government units provide to youth councils, what is the influence of youth councils to decision making processes and whether there is a difference in assessments by youth council members and employees of local and regional self-government units concerning daily collaboration between youth councils and these units. As it were, it was important for the survey that the questionnaires for youth councils were completed by the council members, which was clearly indicated in the questionnaire. However, during analysis of submitted materials and through comments submitted within questionnaires GONG and CYN found that large majority of questionnaires were not filled in by youth council members, but by representatives of cities and municipalities. As Mr. Buković pointed out, this finding gives an answer to the question why questionnaire was completed by only 28 local self-government units (27 cities and just one municipality, out of the total 121 cities and 368 municipalities that comprised survey sample): it seems that as a rule the questionnaire never even made it to youth council members. Still, Mr. Buković offered three possible explanations for such results: either representatives of cities and municipalities, who received the materials, failed to get into contact with youth council members or they failed to motivate youth council members to complete questionnaires, or they concluded that it is acceptable that they fill in questionnaires instead of youth council members. Irrespective of which explanation or even a combination of explanations one might select, the conclusions indicate possible inadequate collaboration between councils and municipalities/cities, (actual) non-activity of youth councils and possible basic disrespect of the autonomy of council's work by local and regional self-government units.

Continuing with his presentation, Mr. Buković emphasized the importance of using the rights and possibilities of youth councils to participate in decision-making processes as one of their basic functions. This refers in particular to communication between youth council members and representatives of cities or municipalities through their separate meetings or through participation of local and regional self-government representatives in sessions of the youth councils. Also, a particularly important issue refers to whether and to what extent do youth council members actually use their right and possibility to participate in sessions of representative bodies of local and regional self-government units and, even more importantly, their right to influence agendas for these sessions. Only 12 youth councils (or 42.9%) proposed items in agendas for sessions of representative bodies within the last one-year period, whereas 16 youth councils (57.1%) never used this possibility. Even though proposed agenda items most often

concerned the work of the council itself (adoption of work program and discussion on its implementation), there were also other proposals that referred to other relevant issues, such as regulation of city traffic, increase in scholarship amounts and issues of accommodation for the youth. Finally, one of the positive findings of this survey indicates relatively frequent participation of youth council members in other advisory and working bodies of local and regional self-government bodies, but also a problematic fact that only one case had been recorded when a member of youth council participated in the work of a body in charge of preparation of city program for youth.

In conclusion of his presentation Mr. Buković commented on the Law on Youth Councils. It was pointed out that this institutional mechanism should be given a real chance to prove whether it is, and to what extent it might be efficient, irrespective of many critical comments received and proposals that CYN had and provided in reference to the text of the Law and its implementation in practice. Examples of good practice of the work of youth councils, though rare, still exist and indicate that it is possible to act well, especially when there is an enabling environment and right people in right places. CYN especially insists on responsibility of the central state administration for successful implementation of this model of youth participation in formulation of public policies on the local level, through provision of additional (technical, administrative and also financial) support for their functioning. The system for selection of youth council members still represents particular challenge, as there is a wide scope of different practices that are implemented. Therefore, CYN proposes that key stakeholders (Ministry of Social Policies and Youth, Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs, local and regional self-government units and CYN) work together, so that these practices might be harmonized by preparing guidelines on how public calls should look like, how elections for youth council members on the local level should be implemented. In closing, Mr. Buković invited all participants wishing to learn more about CYN proposals for improvements to legal framework for establishment and activities of youth councils, to consult publication “Law on Youth Councils in practice”. Moreover, good practice examples detected through the earlier mentioned research, as well as details of the research itself, may be found in publication “With whom local administration collaborates and how”. Both publications were distributed to all roundtable participants, and they are also available for download at www.mmh.hr.

In very open and lively discussion that ensued a wide scope of questions and issues has been opened, concerning participation of youth in formulation of public policies on the local level, but also concerning status of youth in the society in the wider context. During the discussion the problem of “disinterestedness” of the youth in active participation in society and decision-making processes has been mentioned several times, but it was also pointed out that this problem is often used as an excuse to exclude or neglect youth as actors in various social processes. In other words, this problem should actually represent an additional stimulus for finding out and using best mechanisms for information, motivation and inclusion of youth. One of the ways to achieve that is to introduce education on democratic and active citizenship into formal

education system from earliest age, so that young people might attain knowledge and skills necessary for their active and responsible participation in the society.

There was also a discussion on the necessity to recognize youth as a resource and not a problem, on finding mechanisms for better social inclusion of youth with behavioral disorders, on upgrading the concept of inter-generational solidarity through concept of inter-generational collaboration, and on finding solutions for the burning problem of high unemployment of youth in Croatia.