

PARTNERSHIPS FOR PARTICIPATION PROJECT

SECTOR
Youth participation and education

COUNTRY
Finland, Latvia, Germany, Spain, Cameroon, Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and Indonesia

LEAD ORGANISATION
The International Falcon Movement – Socialist Educational International (IFM-SEI), member of the European Youth Forum, the platform of youth organisations in Europe

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DESCRIPTION

The project "Partnerships for Participation" took place in 2015 in nine local communities in Finland, Latvia, Germany, Spain, Cameroon, Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and Indonesia. It was managed by the International Falcon Movement-Socialist Educational International (IFM-SEI), an international umbrella organisation of 50 national and local children and youth movements active all over the world.

This 12-month long project aimed to increase young people's participation in the democratic life of local communities in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, through the building of genuine and sustainable partnerships between young people, schools and local authorities.

Children can bring a lot of innovative ideas and solutions to the table, if they are empowered and listened to. The objectives of the project were therefore to provide a space for young people, youth workers and decision-makers to discuss and exchange experiences of youth participation, to inform local decision-makers on its benefits, and to share, analyse and adapt youth participation approaches already in place in schools and local authorities. To support their participation and involvement in local, political and civic life, one European Voluntary Service (EVS) volunteer accompanied and guided each group of children and teenagers throughout the project.

The participants of the local groups were aged between 13 and 18 years old. In most cases, the projects involved a majority of

children from a disadvantaged economic background, and most groups were gender-mixed. They engaged in various types of activities. In Germany, they decided to work with a local neighbourhood council that had not involved children in the policy-making process in the past, and they managed to have two children invited to attend meetings. In Colombia, the organisation engaged directly with the Interior Ministry, and established youth community citizen councils that have the same rights as adult councils to advise on decision-making in local communities. In Latvia, they provided a school with resources to conduct after-school activities for pupils.

The project was funded by an Erasmus+ grant for the paying of EVS volunteers, and by a mixture of private and public grants for local projects.

A SOCIAL INVESTMENT APPROACH

The main feature of the project was of course its focus on the promotion of children's right to participate. It was also important to ensure that participation practices are inclusive and accessible for everyone, as they usually tend to mainly involve children from affluent backgrounds.

The project worked with quality standards for child participation established by UNICEF. The lead volunteers learned about them in their first training session and the groups of children and teenagers attended an international training course on the topic, so they could evaluate their own projects in regard to these standards.

Empowerment of users was another main concern of the organisation. The planning of the local projects was conducted directly by the teenagers; they decided what to do and how they wanted to do it.

Finally, by involving children in shaping decisions that affect them, the project helped politicians to make appropriate choices, adapted to everyone's needs. Policies obviously improve if lots of people are consulted beforehand, and children are important stakeholders to consider.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

Thanks to the project, nine local partnership projects between youth organisations and local communities have been set up, and hundreds of young people in the world have been empowered to engage in local decision-making. They have improved their self-confidence, their knowledge about political participation, and practical skills such as team work, communication, training and research. The local projects evaluated the satisfaction of the participants, and in all cases they were satisfied. They considered the initiative as very positive, even though cooperation with local authorities did not always work as well as they hoped. The project has also contributed to the cultural openness and internationalisation of youth organisations, by working with EVS volunteers coming from other continents.

The project also had an added value for local authorities themselves by raising decision-makers' awareness of the benefits of youth participation, and encouraging them to ensure this principle is properly implemented. It is also a good response to the scepticism and frustration of some young people towards political institutions. Moreover, it creates a group of trained and motivated teenagers who are eager to take part in community life as active citizens.

A tangible output of the project is the production of a Child Participation Handbook with training activities for young people and youth workers that was published online, so that the lessons drawn from the different initiatives can be shared with as many people as possible.

Even though most of the benefits of the project will only be visible in the long-term, it is safe to say that a positive impact is likely to be seen in the areas of education, combating poverty, and social inclusion, since they were the topics that the different groups were most interested in.

LOOKING FORWARD

The objective is that these kinds of initiatives are replicated in as many local communities as possible. Educators can use the Child Participation Handbook as a reference toolkit to launch such projects. The project was a success in different regions of the world, so there is reason to believe that it could be implemented in other contexts.