Empowering youth leadership for democracy sustainability

Manuela Epure¹ +

¹ Member of the Academy of Romanian Scientists
Professor at Spiru Haret University, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract. For the young generation it is important to learn about democracy and participation and project RO-13-E9-2013-R1 “Empowering youth leadership for sustainable democracy” developed by Pro Global Science Association played an important role in this direction. A special attention was paid to evaluate the learning outcomes, the effectiveness of methods used during the seminars and the potential of each “actor” involved to disseminate the project’ results. The paper is presenting the results of the feedback survey among participants and the main observations on participants experience, perception and opinions, their overall perception of their own informal learning experience. The results are important for further developments in the area of informal learning, learning retention rates and learning tools employed.

Keywords: youth, participatory democracy, leadership, informal learning, learning retention rate

JEL Codes: Y80

1. Introduction

Learning about democracy and participation is an imperative for young generation. Being part of an EU-financed project it is always a challenging experience. The project RO-13-E9-2013-E1 “Empowering youth leadership for democracy sustainability”(EYLDS) created the most suitable framework for both: learning and experiencing leadership and other more such as: participation, team building, multiculturalism, improving communication skills and self confidence etc. The project RO-13-E9-2013-E1 “Empowering youth leadership for democracy sustainability” was possible due to the financial support of Youth in Action program and the Romanian Agency for Community Programs for Education and Professional Development.

The aim was to create an identification and training program for prospective young leaders and to have as a final result a system of recognition, motivation and rewarding of the active involvement of the youth in their local communities.

The current article comes out from the examination of a feedback survey results. The survey was run among project participants, young people between 15-30 years old. Short interviews were also taken with representatives of the host organisation (Pro Global Science Association) and its project partners.

A special attention was paid to evaluate the learning outcomes, the effectiveness of the methods used during the seminars and the potential of each “actor” involved in the dissemination of the project results.
2. The future starts today!

2.1. Democracy and youth involvement

Participatory democracy is beneficial not only for those who have chosen to get involved, but also for the society as a whole. The participation and involvement of citizens is a must in any decision-making process and it is a prerequisite of the democracy’s functioning and consolidation. At the same time, a better adjustment of decisions and implementation plans means that the real social need is met. Getting citizens involved in the decision-making process means a better understanding of their needs and a bigger support to bring them in the public policies.

Being informed and involved, the young person will find answers more easily to some specific problems such as: choosing a career path, spending free time, socializing with people sharing the same ideals and interests, or finding a job.

An effective participation should mix the efforts of the youth and of the mature generation along with the authorities’ efforts. The ideal is to be articulated in a common strategy and a set of coordinated measures.

Having all these in mind, a project proposal was written and it turns that it was a successful proposal in the Youth in Action grant competition 2013, being funded for many reasons: conception, objectives, management and structure etc.

The project RO-13-E9-2013-E1 “Empowering youth leadership for democracy sustainability” aims and objectives were:

- to inform the youth about the democratic processes at the European level and to promote active participation in democratic processes at the local community level;
- to prepare the most suitable candidates for all kind off election processes at nationa/European level;
- to stimulate the youth interest for the development of associative structures;
- to promote creativity and entrepreneurship and to help youngsters in developing skills to use in their fight against unemployment, marginalization and poverty;
- to explore the leadership potential of the target group;
- to define the leader’s profile and to list the motivational determinants which can generate performance and long-term involvement;
- to use informal education tools (simulation, debate, experiment, role-play etc) and to improve/measure the effectiveness of these tools.

The international concern about the involvement of youth in the public decision emerged in early ‘90s. In 1992 the European Charter was adopted on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life - document of the European Council.¹

The main principles stated in this document are:

- the participation of young people to the local and regional life should be part of global politics of citizens’ participation at the public life;

¹ Ilie S, Petrescu C(2005), – Tinerii și participarea la decizie, CALITATEA VIEŢII, XVI, nr. 3–4,
setting up the youth components of the sectoral politics, the local and regional authorities follow the implementation of different forms of youth participation, through consultation and cooperation with them or their leaders;

different forms of participations, specified in the Charter, are for all and a special attention will be paid to disadvantaged groups, no matter the nature of this disadvantage (CE, 2003)

A recent report, commissioned by the European Knowledge Center for Youth Policy (EKCYP), is making a synthesis of the data provided by 35 national correspondents from the affiliated countries, regarding the youth participation. The study is trying to find an answer and to draw a global picture of Europe on:
1. legislation regarding youth participation;
2. the involvement of young people in the democratic representative system;
3. learning participation and raise awareness. According to Morlino, participation is “the entire set of behaviours, either conventional or unconventional, legal or borderline in relation with legality, that allows women and men, as individuals or group, to create, revive or strengthen a group identification or try to influence the recruitment of and decisions by political authorities (the representative and/ or governmental ones) in order to maintain or change the allocation of existing values.” (Morlino 2009: 39). Participation refers, therefore, to the citizens’ capacity and possibilities to take part in a democracy. For Dahl (1989, 2000: 37), effective participation is one of five criteria to be fulfilled by democracies: ‘Before a policy is adopted..... all the members must have equal and effective opportunities for making their views known to the other members as to what the policy should be’. ‘Inclusion of all adults’ is another one of these criteria for Dahl (1989, 2000: 38): „All, or at any rate most, adult permanent residents should have the full rights of citizens that are implied by the first four criteria”.

At the European level, young people are institutionally represented by the European Youth Forum. The importance of this institution’s aspirations are recognised by representatives across the continent. This is perhaps most clearly put by the motto ‘nothing should be done about young people without young people’, as quoted by a member of the Slovene Youth Council.

Encouraging volunteering as a key aspect of civic consciousness amongst young people has been one of the EU and Council of Europe’s foremost strategic goals in the past five years.

2.2. Survey design

The RO-13-E9- 2013-E1 “Empowering youth leadership for democracy sustainability” was possible due to the cooperation of several partners as follows:

**Romania**
- Pro Global Science Association - *Bucharest*
- Support for Youth Development Association - *Cluj-Napoca*

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1 Manfred Zetner, (2011) Youth Participation in Policy Matching. Finding of a summary analysis of the information templates in participarea in the EKCYP, Vien
Italy
- Informamentis Europa - Santa Maria di Capua Vetere, Caserta
- Work in Progress - Galatone, Lecce
Latvia
- Social Innovation Centre - Daugmale

The expected impact of the project refers to:
- A better understanding of the leader concept and his/her traits.
- Raising awareness of decision makers of the importance of youth active involvement.
- Raising awareness of decision makers to the problems of youth in the community, acceptance of dialogue with youth leader.
- Changing attitudes of young people from passive to active, stimulating creativity, their awareness of the problems of their peers.
- Better communication of expectations, ideals and needs of young people.
- Awareness of the process of "granting the vote" - young people understand the responsibility of voting.

In order to evaluate the project accomplishments, a survey was designed and conducted among all the participants (40 persons) immediately after the project’s main activities were over. For this purpose a set of questions were developed and an online questionnaire was available, in a controlled environment, for a month. The access to questions was possible only for the participants and the response rate was 51.5%, which can be considered good compared with the average response rate in other similar online surveys. The technical support for running the survey was provided by SurveyAnalytics (www.surveyanalytics.com).

From 40 persons, the questionnaire was opened by 32 using mainly the computer as an access device and mobile phone in a small percentage. The browser most frequently used to access the questionnaire was
Chrome. The questionnaire completion rate was 94.74%, which is high and the average completion time was 3 minutes.

2.3. Variables and hypothesis

The survey variables were established according to the main aspects subject of evaluation:

a. **First attendance at a seminar on leadership and participation**;

   H1: the majority of participants attended for the first time a program on leadership and participation.

![First time attendance](image1.png)

The responses confirmed the hypothesis H1, and we can conclude that the project had an important informative role for the majority of participants.

b. **Previously involvement in Youth projects**

   H2: The majority of participants have low or no similar experience in Youth projects

![Previous involvement in Youth projects](image2.png)

c. The results show us a relatively balanced composition of participants: 44.4% have previous experience in Youth in Action projects, and 55.6% have none. The balance indicates the fact that a mutual learning process took place during seminars, the exchange of information on youth projects generated the opportunity to explore other projects results, to learn from each other’s experience. **Level of knowledge on leadership and active participation**
H3: The participants have a moderate/low level of knowledge on leadership and democratic participation.

In order to measure the level of knowledge a scale with 5 levels was used, from 1 = very low to 5= excellent.

Looking at the responses distribution, one can appreciate that overall level of knowledge is moderate, average 3.37 on the scale.

Fig. 4 Participants’ level of knowledge on the three major project topics

d. Level of learning

The respondents were asked to formulate an opinion about the learning process that they were subjects of. The participants appreciated that the learning process was effective in terms of the quantity of information they received and how much they learned on the major themes.

The responses show an average of 3.704 on the considered scale (the same as that described above), and that reflects a good perception of participants about the effectiveness of the learning process.

Fig. 5 Perception on the learning experience

e. Effectiveness of learning methods employed during the seminars

The respondents were asked about their perception on learning tools effectiveness, in general, having the intention to compare the results with those provided by the scientific and systematic research in the field\(^3\). Recent research shows that the learning retention is highly dependent on

\(^3\) NTL Institute for Applied Behavioural Sciences, Alexandria, USA
the usage of various learning tools (group discussion 50%, practice by doing 75%, teaching others 90%). Looking at the pyramid from Fig. 6, we can easily realize that the most effective learning occurs when interactive methods are used and the learners’ level of involvement is high.

Fig. 6 The learning pyramid (source NTL Institute for Applied Behavioural Sciences, USA)

The overall matrix scorecard shows the participants’ capacity to identify the most effective learning method and their opinion matches in great extent the scientific results.
f. Identification of the main learning tools used during EYLDS seminars

Subjects were asked to nominate the learning tools employed during the EYLDS seminars. The purpose was to evaluate the participants’ capacity to distinguish various learning tools and to make the difference in terms of learning outcomes.

The survey results reflect the participants’ capacity to identify learning tools employed and as one can see a wide range of them were used for the only reason to increase the learning retention rate and to make the informal learning experience as effective as possible. The responses confirmed our hypothesis that diversifying the learning tools will increase the impact of the learning process and of the project as a whole.
g. Participants’ overall satisfaction level

Survey respondents were asked their satisfaction level on four different variables:
- learning experience
- interaction with peers
- multicultural experience
- networking

The selection of the above-mentioned variables was constructed based on the EYLDS project objectives regarding learning, participation, networking etc. On a scale from 1=unsatisfied to 5=very satisfied, the overall average score of participants’ opinion is 4.017 which means “satisfied”.

As a final evaluation of the EYLDS organizers’ efforts, the above-mentioned overall score is good and reflects a powerful feedback and the proof of a good managerial and scientific work.

![Overall Matrix Scorecard: How satisfied are you with the following?](image)

**Fig. 9 Participants’ perception of satisfaction**

h. Opinion on overall experience as a participant

The EYLDS project management team considered important to evaluate the participants’ level of satisfaction quantify as overall experience and the results shown the high percentage of satisfaction of 88.24% of total number of participants.
i. The age structure of respondents

The responses synthesis reveals a diverse age structure which is good in terms of sharing experience, learning from others, and it is a confirmation that EYLDS management team complied with the participants selection rules.

![Fig. 10 Overall experience as EYLDS participant](image)

![Fig. 11 Participants age structure](image)

![Fig. 12 Gender structure of participants](image)

The graph indicates a gender balanced composition of the participants group and confirmed that the gender balance condition of the funding body was respected.

3. Conclusions

The EYLDS project was an interesting and challenging experience for participants as much as for organizers. The results confirm the formulated hypothesis and are in line with the expectations of the project promoter, Pro Global Science Association and its partners. The results are important
for further developments in the area of informal learning, learning retention rates and learning tools employed. The main suggested developments were:

- Replication of the workshop series among other youngsters.
- Create a national network of such educational programs, summer-school type.
- Publication of the Youth Leadership Guide so that the workshop can be multiplicated in other communities.
- Create a network of graduates of the program and develop this idea into a *Network project*.

4. **Acknowledgements**

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5. **References**


