Participation of Youths on the Maltese Islands

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition of Youths

Youth is a time during which individuals discover their identity and begin to develop their role and sense of responsibility within society. It is a crucial period where certain decisions may impact or transform the course and direction of one’s life. Active participation within the community is the key for Youths to identify their vital role within society.

Speaking at the University of Cape Town in 1966, Robert Kennedy, an American politician, appealed to youths to fulfill their potential and play a constructive role within society, stating:

"Our answer is the world's hope; it is to rely on youth. The cruelties and the obstacles of this swiftly changing planet will not yield to obsolete dogmas and outworn slogans. It cannot be moved by those who cling to a present which is already dying, who prefer the illusion of security to the excitement and danger which comes with even the most peaceful progress. This world demands the qualities of youth: not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease..."
1.2 **Policy on Youths**

In 2012, the Kunsill Nazzjonali taz-Zghazagh (KNZ) celebrated its 20th anniversary. It was therefore considered to be an opportune time to carry out research on youth participation on the Maltese Islands, and thus observe trends in this regards, and assess the needs and requirements to increase activism amongst youths. From a young age, individuals should seek to identify their role in society. In fact, in their research Joseph Ellul and Paul Mangani underline the importance of participation in society, citing Said, who states that

‘*Citizenship is not only about formal rights and duties but also about everyday participation in our society*.‘
2. **Guiding Principles**

The guiding principles that have inspired this research and that are espoused by the National Youth Council are the following:

2.1 **Equal Opportunities**

KNZ believes in a society where youths enjoy equal opportunities to share and develop their own opinions and thoughts, while also contributing to the community that they form part of. This will ensure a more pluralist society.

2.2 **Freedom of Expression**

KNZ believes that, under any circumstances, youths must be given a voice and provided with the opportunity to communicate their ideas within the community through any medium.

2.3 **Community Development**

KNZ believes that Community Development may be better enhanced by taking into consideration and utilizing youths and, moreover, encouraging their role and participation as an important human resource in society.

2.4 **Means towards Change**

KNZ believes that change towards a better society must begin from the very core of the community. Society must recognise the role to be played by youths as important vehicles for change.
2.5 Inclusion

KNZ believes that inclusion should not be restricted to those Youths participating in an Organisation. All youths should have the opportunity to be included and actively participate within society, regardless of background. This may lead to unbiased and clearer ideas within society.
3. Discussion Forum

3.1 Organising the Forum

A discussion forum was organised so as to obtain a wider overview of youth participation in society. A press call was issued and an email was sent to all organisations under the KNZ statute, inviting all interested individuals to participate within this forum.

The event was held on the 11th of June 2012 at the new premises of the National Youth Council in Floriana. Attendees included KNZ members Mark Cassar, Matthew Vella and Frank Ciantar. Three other organisations participated in the discussion forum, namely, Zghazagh Azzjoni Kattolika, Young Enterprise and Moviment Graffiti who’s representative were Sarah J. Caruana, Tonio Axisa and Robert Chetcuti respectively. Two workshops were organised within the discussion.

3.2 Workshop 1

The first workshop discussed the general importance of youth participation. It was pointed out immediately that in today’s world, companies and prospective employers do not only seek certificates and qualifications, but also favour candidates and potential employees who would have engaged in extra-curricular activities and participation. The discussion also emphasised the fact that, nowadays, youths are spending far more time utilising social media such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter, rather than spending spare time participating in voluntary organisations.
3.3 Workshop 2

The second workshop commenced by discussing the educational system and its role in society. Education is one of the main pillars in the evolvement of a Youth. In fact, Huckle et al., 1996: xiii, argues that ‘By education we mean a life-long process of learning, action and reflection involving citizens with continual learning and openness to change taken as key characters to the sustainable issue’.

It was pointed out that many youths, who might in turn be influenced by their guardians, are more inclined towards focusing on their studies so as to obtain higher marks in exams rather than giving up their time to participate in voluntary educational activities. The issue of youths attending private lessons was also discussed, which might also be a factor in terms of youths not participating in extra-curricular activities due to lack of time. Joseph Ellul and Paul Mangani quote Michael J. Shannon (1992), who states that; ‘The goal of education should be to create individuals who understand that the essential meaning of being human derives from acknowledging our interdependency and therefore accepting our mutual responsibility’.

The Company Programme was also mentioned in the discussion. This is a course intended to teach youths how to open up a business from scratch, targeting those who might be willing to invest on their own later on in their lives.

3.4 Conclusion

On a general note, there was a general understanding that there has to be a shift towards more participation within and outside the school. A lesser syllabus in the educational system might help in achieving this shift.
4. **KNZ Position**

4.1 **Youth Participation**

The National Youth Council has consistently favoured and promoted Youth Participation in society. The council believes that Youths bring strength and knowledge through their input. Over the past 20 years, the KNZ has therefore worked hard to improve all forms of youth participation.

4.2 **Different Organisations**

In Malta and as well in other countries, the nature of participation is increasing due to increase in different types of organisations. Today, we may find political, social, sports and other types of organisations. The National Youth Council is in favour of all active organisations that increase the chances of youth participation. Online groups are also helping achieving such goals, especially when there are related social discussions in the group.

4.3 **Think Equal**

Society may give rise to stereotypes, which may result in people differently. As a result, some youths might find it more difficult to participate, engage and integrate within society. In this regard, the National Youth Council maintains that it is the primary aim of the Council to encourage and facilitate youth of participation, regardless of politics, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation.
5. **Recommendations and Final Considerations**

5.1 **Youths - The Present and Future**

Considering the fact that youths are the future of our society, it might be a good initiative that more important decisions are left in their hands. Considering the University of Malta as an example, Youths who are dedicating their time to organisations may still not be in a position to take certain decisions regarding critical aspects affecting other students of the same age. Considering the fact that such students may better understand certain situations as such problems might also be affecting them, and knowing the interest of such youths participating in such organisations, decisions might be left in such hands with the monitoring of upper level management. The National Youth Council recommends that more decisions affecting students needs to be left in the hands of such youths as it is to be kept in mind that these are not only the present but will be the future.

5.2 **A Shift towards greater participation**

There certainly remain youths who have never participated into a voluntary organisation for a variety of reasons. The National Youth Council will continue to work and promote Youth participation within the Maltese islands. The Council believes that the more youths are exposed to different organisations, greater knowledge and skills will be acquired that may be utilised later on in life.

5.3 **Promoting Participation**

KNZ will continue to promote youth participation on the Maltese Islands. Some recommendations are outlined hereunder:
- Social networking to be kept up-to-date – The website, facebook and Youtube should be kept up-to-date so as to continue promoting participation through these media. It is being suggested that a general profile may be set up, where every activity organised by any organisation may be posted on this same profile, keeping all subscribers up-to-date on all such activities.

- New annual activities for youths – KNZ should increase its exposure to the rest of the community by organising more educational activities. In fact, this year KNZ organised several activities, such as a Tree Planting Activity, a meeting with the Speaker Hon. Michael Frendo, a Presentation on parliamentary themes to both Hon. Lawrence Gonzi and Hon. Joseph Muscat, a seminar regarding Sedqa, a seminar regarding Creative thinking with Joseph Woods, and others.

- Work closely with organisations to improve participation – There needs to be more direct contact with organisations in order to reach more youths in society. A new approach that has been adopted by Mr. Karl Gonzi over the past two years has been to establish meetings with new entities who have never been in contact with KNZ, such as KNPD and ‘We are’.
6 Limitations to the research

As outlined above, a discussion forum was organised where different organisations participated and provided their views on the participation of Youths on the Maltese Islands. Due to unforeseen circumstances, only three participants from various organisations participated in the discussion forum, which may have limited the research and depth of discussion on certain topics outlined.

Having said all this, a draft policy has been sent to all members of the KNZ executive where appropriate feedback was provided. Moreover, the draft policy was discussed with all member organisations of the KNZ and appropriate feedback received.
References


‘Young People Taking Action in Their Community – An Environmental Youth Work Experience’ Authors: Joseph Ellul and Paul Mangani