

PhD thesis

**COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIP OF YOUTH
NGOs AND LOCAL MUNICIPALITIES REGARDING
NGOs' INVOLVEMENT IN MUNICIPAL DUTIES**

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1. Thesis' target and goals

The thesis aims to overview issues regarding cooperation and partnership between local municipalities and youth NGOs in the North-Great-Plain Region. Our focus is on processes where municipal duties are realized by the involvement of NGOs, or where compulsory municipal duties are realized by NGOs, out of the municipal institutional system, in contracted service-outsourcing.

Our motivation was justified by the fact that as a result of global tendencies and Hungarian idiosyncrasies, youth phenomena is undergoing transformation while the institutional system designed for youth is also altering. NGOs' and the state's cooperation, as well as a partnership of multiple levels and subjects is more and more to their own interest, which easily justify a profound analysis of the field. Non-governmental institutions have a crucial role in filling the gap appearing between state-financed provision and market-driven services, in framing social self-organization and –representation, in fostering not for-profit social innovation, as well as in seeking for solutions for social issues.

Expecting to establish the framework of a Regional Youth Strategy, the study attempts to analyze youth's organized activity based on tools of institutional sociology, with the purpose of mapping the region's varied and hardly perspicuous youth organizations, their goals, social functions and networks.

In the framework of this study, we consider youth organizations as groups of youngsters aged between 15 and 29, which - irrespectively of their size and number of members –, for the sake of mutual goals, with members' active and volunteer participation, carry out activities as a registered artificial person. Whether they operate connected to/serving an adult organization, whether they have been institutionalized on behalf of a grass-root initiative, they contribute to stimulate the social participation of youth.

The geographical frame of our study is the North-Great Plain Region, with special regard to county centers such as Debrecen, Nyíregyháza and Szolnok. Our firm belief is that though national strategy is very important, youth issues are, and should be treated on a local level, which induces solutions that encompass local traits and respond to actual problems arising on a local level.

Necessarily, the study leans on previous nationwide researches, encompassing relevant surveys of the eighties, periodic researches of 'Youth 2000, 2004, 2008', results gain from the surveys of 'SZIGET (ISLE) Festivals, as well as researches revealing youth issues of the region.

Although we witnessed attempts aiming to map youth's issues of the region, to describe youth professionals' activities or to analyze youth NGOs' mission (see Murányi), they have concerned neither activities of municipal youth referents nor the partnership between youth NGOs and local municipalities. Present study therefore may well contribute to the knowledge regarding youth issues of the region.

We suppose that youth referents have or should have significant role in developing partnership and cooperation between local municipalities and Youth NGOs, since their activities are primarily shaped by local circumstances and opportunities.

2. Methodology

Present study has been designed in a decisively descriptive manner, attempting to collect relevant information combining qualitative and quantitative methods. It also attempts to reveal opportunities, forms, instruments, structures and methods as well as difficulties and limitations of the cooperation between youth NGOs and local municipalities. Integrated qualitative and quantitative empirical data allow a better understanding of the issue.

Empirical data has been recorded in spring, 2006 and 2008. In the course of quantitative research no sampling has been made, since data collection was expected to be all-inclusive, nevertheless we could only involve 32 youth referents representing the North-Great Plain Region. Data has been recorded by questioners in the course of a short telephone discourse. Considering the low number of respondents, we decided to use simplest statistical tools.

In the second part of the research, we recorded 17 structured interview made with youth referents, selected with the help of random sampling. They have been selected with regard their connection with local communities of Debrecen, Nyíregyháza and Szolnok county centers. The

contact was seen as relevant whether an NGO has applied for one of the funds (including civil, sport, youth and culture funds) of the municipality, whether has a contracted partnership concerning their involvement in municipal duties, whether they have contacted the relevant local youth referent.

3. Results

The first part attempts to define a conceptual-interpretative frame in order to support the analysis of the theme, the second part roughly presents the key characteristics of North-Great Plain, focusing on local traits seen as important factors regarding youth problems, while the third part of this the work describes the region's youth organizations, youth referents and their way of cooperation with local municipalities.

After clarifying key concepts, an overview of the formation/formulation of civil society and youth organizations is given. Since the latter cannot be discussed as separate matter from general social history, it is treated as an organic part of it. In order to design the conceptual frame of the topic, we except relating historical moments, which approach naturally produces a schematic overview. This chapter is followed by the idiosyncrasies of West- and of East-Center-European nonprofit sector, the state of art of the Hungarian tendencies regarding youth researches, and the relational features between state, municipalities and NGOs. Nevertheless the prejudice and political dimensions penetrating the field makes analysis difficult.

The empirical research itself has been preceded by second-analysis of previous statistical data targeting to picture the youth structure of the region, not leaving out of consideration county-level issues.

As confirmed by this study's results, youth issues are framed by close cooperation of three local partners: youth NGOs, local municipalities and youth referents.

Deriving from the analysis, a description of a typical youth referent can be given: she may be a married middle-aged woman, she may have children, may have a college degree in pedagogy and poor foreign language skills. Her workplace is the local mayor's office, has a temporary

contract, fulfilling her duties in full-time work but not in separate scope of activities. Being a member of an association or foundation she has some contact with the local civil society, nevertheless her personal relationships with other NGOs are poor and fairly limited. The above described youth referent cannot be seen as a considerable personality, having no contribution to local policy-making. Her work can hardly be said efficient, it's rather unsettled, a great number of youth referents have been put in this position for want of better, therefore they are slightly committed and are not aware of the opportunities hidden in the position. Unsurprisingly, their mediating role seen as crucial in enhancing partnership and cooperation between local municipalities and youth NGOs does not seem evolving. This statement is also confirmed by the fact that although some municipalities employ youth referents to foster local youth NGOs, referents' scope of tasks, as well as their role in the youth service system is rather unregulated, their activity principally depends on local circumstances and opportunities, and on referents' personal attitudes and networks.

Local municipalities also seem to be uncertain and ambiguous about employing youth referents, and in general about developing a youth strategy. Referents' employment is a volunteer task of municipalities, financed by central funds, which explains referents' temporary contracts. Youth issues are generally penetrated by political dimensions, which necessarily contribute to inconsistencies: local youth politics are not strategically planned, rather characterized by short-term recrudescence; therefore the development of local youth conceptions is mainly a question of political will.

As a third pillar of youth issues, our research data pictures the typical youth NGO as well. According to our results, typical youth NGOs of the region have a past of 2 to 15 years, while members usually have mutual work experience deriving long before the organization has been registered. Acting on central-east European trends, their activity focus primarily on culture, sport and civilization, while projects are coordinated by a professional member working in relevant field. They attempt to organize events and services fulfilling some kind of deficiency. Their main financial sources are central or EU funds, nor enterprises, neither individuals contribute to their operational costs, they generally have a regional scope of activities and their leaders are volunteers

not having income for their job. Typical youth NGOs have incidental cooperation with local municipalities, not having contracted duties in municipal service provision.

Our results concerning partnership of NGOs, municipalities and youth referents portray well separated models in the region. The depth and intensity of this cooperation is affected by political will from the side of municipalities (whether they establish institutions, develop youth strategy and employ a referent), by educational attainment and personal network from the side of youth referents, and by the ability of self representation from the side of NGOs.

According to these conditions, we can separate the following types regarding cooperation between our three partners: **tight, intensive and fruitful cooperation**: the youth referent is well educated and has a wide personal network enhancing cooperation with a great number of youth NGOs, who have ability of self-representation and are highly motivated to achieve their goals. What's more, strong political will and a previously developed youth strategy contributes to the cooperation, **loose cooperation**: although the youth referent is more or less well educated and conscientiously attempts to contact youth NGOs and maintaining existing youth network, supporting them as much as possible, these attempts are not patronized by local municipalities' will regarding developing youth strategy. These cooperation are rather superficial than based on a mutual understanding, **ad-hoc cooperation**: the personal network of the referent is considered to be very tight, he/she is not well educated, having incidental relationships with youth NGOs whose ability of self-representation is very poor, and the municipality shows no will of considering youth issues, not even at the strategic level.

Henceforth the empirical results of the study will be presented according to the previously defined hypothesis.

Our assumption that the majority of youth NGOs does not offer alternative values and opportunities of activity to peer groups, seems to be confirmed by our results. Youngsters prefer to enjoy themselves in informal, unstructured circumstances, to assemble for the sake of a concert or a party, than to join youth NGOs representing common values and goals. Though within special circumstances, events are capable to assemble a greater number of youngsters on behalf of this or that issue, they will not act as a community.

According to our assumption, youngsters define organizational identity by arranging orientation spots not including any dimension of politics. Youth NGOs and their programs are not attractive – what, to some extent is a result of their absence in media -, consequently youngsters simply do not seek to be connected to them.

Our hypothesis regarding efficiency of events organized by youth NGOs also seems to be confirmed. Even if youngsters attend these events, barren programs are unable to concern them. As one the NGO-leader defined: *„people come motivated, clap their hands and go home”*.

Empirical data only partly justify our assumption that NGOs' partnership with other organizations, municipalities and media representatives are ad hoc and incidental: almost all of the NGOs reported of a wide professional and civil network. According to their profile, all NGOs attempts to maintain cooperation with other NGOs and state institutions, representing incidental, project-related partnerships as well as intensive cooperation going back high over the past. Not one of the NGOs reported about a wide international professional network as well, nevertheless NGOs are the initiators, and they are hardly connected to local municipalities. Although the majority of NGOs has always been making efforts to maintain positive cooperation with local municipalities, the connection is highly incidental since municipalities do not tend to return it. All the „Office” provides is supporting NGOs with information as well as with subsidies to be applied for one or two times a year.

Cooperation of NGOs and municipalities, assisted by youth referents is not a common phenomena, but comprehensible since the majority of youth referents has no connection to civil society. The larger a settlement is referents are the more probable members of one or even more NGOs – in smaller ones they may not be a member of any. Supposedly referents do not attain enough information, are not aware even of their own settlement's potential, and their efforts often vanish in institutional bureaucracy. Our results painfully justify the assumption that referents' work is prevalently only a bubble.

As for service provision, youth NGOs participate only in case of duties of their own profile, noting that a number a NGOs have no clear profile which admittedly hinders the evolution of partnerships. The most frequent fields of cooperation are sport, culture/civilization and spare time.

In contrast with our expectations, partnerships in municipal service-provision arise the less in the field of environmental protection, education and child- and youth-protection.

Summarizing our results the cooperation and partnership between NGOs and local municipalities is in its infancy, principally due to the fact that municipalities do not take NGOs as partners, particularly when they represent youngsters. At present only NGOs seek opportunities to cooperate with municipalities. Although youth referents should fulfill this gap by their mediating and coordinating role, their attempts so far have fallen. The cooperation between the two parties seem to lack consensus and recognition of mutual interests, what's more, local municipalities' aspects are unclear and lack will as well. Existing and operating partnerships are neither based on professional dimensions, and it is probable that in the long term NGOs lose interest in seeking bilateral partnerships with state institutions, and prefer focusing on cooperation only with civil society, as reported by some NGO leaders.

Leaders and representatives of youth NGOs are expected to give up attempting to create partnerships with municipalities: even if they are committed and determined, their work is not acknowledged neither in moral, nor in a financial aspect, nor it receives attention or publicity, therefore sooner or later their motivation shall run out. There were times when youth party has indicated as a barometer all transformations occurring in society. These times' pluralist world certainly represent a multi-color youth as well: we meet NGOs of diverse forms, types and interests. Among them one can find self-centered organizations as well as NGOs serving and supplying adult organizations or parties, but neither of them is capable to react on problems occurring in society.

Society should be committed to open up space towards youth whether on the personal whether on organizational level, real presence is needed in their life. There may be youngsters who only need a place to play football, but there are certainly others who call for an approach that gives them the chance to represent themselves – and not only in time of elections. Chances certainly could be of a multiple level: residence, feeding, education are basic needs, but any kind of assembling may be as important a need for youngsters as the basic ones. They claim for diverse community events and spare-time facilities and agree on that local municipalities shall create the institutional framework. Civil society could contribute to these issues but not by settling on them or

lead by political wills, rather by building on youngsters' intrinsic needs supported by essential professional aid.

In the course of the last decade, NGOs' service function, parallel with their share in traditionally state-based service provision has increased; therefore we can state that Hungarian nonprofit sector is approaching West-European models and standards. Our firm belief is that the key factor of influence, widening and strengthening civil sphere consists of its ability to exploit new opportunities of information society, particularly regarding potential in mutual exchange of information and experiences. In case civil society is able to exploit its natural flexibility, latitude and creativity, it shall have the potential to become such a powerful social formative force like economy and politics already are on the local, national and international level alike.

As for youth referents: an optimistic future is seem to be confirmed, since in October, 2009 the government has accepted a National Youth Strategy and on 13, January 2010 its Action Plan of 2010-2011, according to which regulation concerning municipalities' duties regarding child- and youth issues, as well as the scope of activities of municipal youth representatives have to get prepared. Until 31, December 2011 the Minister of Social and Employment Affairs will be responsible for the realization of the Action Plan. Hopefully tasks will be also accompanied by adequate resources, most suitably by normative subsidies. In case youth referents have tangible tasks and scope of activity, as well as necessary financial resources, their work shall go more effective as well.

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