



DDCP-YD/ETD (2017) 189

Strasbourg, 29 September 2017

Summer School Young refugees as actors for social inclusion and intercultural dialogue

Conclusions

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The summer school Young refugees¹ as actors for social inclusion and intercultural dialogue was co-organised by the Council of Europe Youth Department and the Global Platform for Syrian Students in co-operation with Kiron Open Higher Education for Refugees and Voice of Young Refugees in Europe. It was held from 27 August to 3 September at the University of Minho in Braga, Portugal, with the support of the Portuguese national agency of Erasmus+ Youth and the University of Minho. The support and youth-oriented approaches of the city of Braga, and Strasbourg's "Welcoming refugees with dignity" initiatives inspired the participants and provided hope.

The summer school brought together nearly 60 participants: young refugees, students in forced mobility and youth workers active with refugees from Council of Europe member states. A meeting of experts on guidelines for supporting refugee minors in transition to adulthood was also convened by the Council of Europe within the framework of the school.

The summer school followed on from the experience and proposals of the seminar Social Inclusion of Refugee Students, co-organised by the same partners in 2016 at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg. The school aimed at developing the capacities of the participants as multipliers and agents of change in their communities and organisations. It was based on the non-formal education principles of empowerment and participation, and of reinforcing the resilience and leadership skills of young refugees. The programme covered various issues,

¹ In this document, the term 'refugee' refers to all people seeking asylum, migrants, refugees, those applying for refugee status, as well as those coming from conflict regions and emergency situations.

needs and expectations in the areas of human rights and democratic citizenship, social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, leadership and youth-led projects and initiatives.

This document reflects the main findings, issues and realities faced by the participants, as well as their expectations, commitments and recommendations. These conclusions represent the outcome of the proposals and discussions by the participants; they do not necessarily represent the opinion of the Council of Europe, the partner organisations in the activity, nor the participants' sending organisations.

Young refugees are young people

Children and young people seeking asylum or having the status of refugees are first and foremost children and young people entitled to the same human rights as those of any other child or young person in their host societies. They have legitimate expectations for "equal opportunities and experience which enable them to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies to play a full part in all aspects of society"². Each refugee, regardless of their age or status, should be treated with the inherent dignity as that of any other fellow human, and not be subject to stigma or reduced to their nationality, religion, colour or sex. Being a refugee is a temporary status, not a personal attribute.

The legal, personal and social situation of young refugees is often characterised by precariousness and insecurity, which are particularly acute in the case of unaccompanied or separated children and young people. It is essential that the member states of the Council of Europe live up to their commitments and obligations under humanitarian and human rights law by protecting, supporting and empowering young refugees on their path to autonomy, social inclusion and participation. Refugees must be welcomed with dignity; their exceptional capacity of resilience should be a source of inspiration and motivation.

Young refugees and students have the right to pursue their education and should be supported in this process. Education is key to their social inclusion and personal development, and enables them to contribute to the society they live in. The Rapid Response Mechanism for Higher Education in Emergencies proposed by the Global Platform for Syrian Students and supported by Portugal in the framework of the World Humanitarian Forum (May 2016, Istanbul) should be further disseminated and effectively supported.

Youth policies should take into account the specific realities and needs of young refugees with a view to supporting their social inclusion and participation. Youth work can have an equally relevant role and provide spaces for learning and practising citizenship, and overcoming isolation, stigmatisation or the post-traumatic experiences of young refugees. Non-formal education possibilities should be open and made available to young refugees in order to support the development of their linguistic, cultural and social competences in their host society.

Human rights education

Human rights education (HRE) is an important tool in the facilitation of social inclusion of young refugees, as well as in combating discrimination, which almost all refugee youth face in their daily lives. HRE initiatives should focus on a long-term strategy and should target both host community members as well as young refugees, as social inclusion is a two-way process. Religion and sexuality, as well as other "controversial issues" may be delicate and at times difficult issues to work with, but should not be avoided or ignored as a part of HRE, and should be addressed from a human rights perspective. However, in order for it to be successful, HRE must be led by trained professionals, with the development of an intercultural approach specific to the target group, as well as knowledge of the background of participants.. Young refugees have a very important role to play as multipliers and facilitators of human rights education, notably in their social environments, and should be supported in this process, specifically by accessing training opportunities at a national or European level.

² Committee of Ministers Resolution **CM/Res(2008)23** on the youth policy of the Council of Europe

Gender

Gender equality issues have been repeatedly noted by young refugees themselves as a major concern and should be urgently addressed by adequately enforcing the existing legislation on gender equality without prejudice to refugees. Personnel working with refugees, including the police, migration services, medical staff and social workers should receive specific training on working with LGBTQI+ and survivors of gender-based violence. Raising awareness and enabling learning on gender rights and issues among young refugees and host communities should also be a part of the solution.

Democratic participation

Young refugees should enjoy equal access to their rights, just as other young people do, and this is particularly important during current times when the rule of law and democracy are under threat across Europe. Learning and applying the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law are essential for young refugees and their communities to be able to understand and take part in democracy, and to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Young refugees should especially have more opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making processes, but not only on matters directly concerning them. Projects and policies targeting young refugees across Europe often do not involve them in the planning or execution of these initiatives. This is not only a violation of their rights to active participation, but leads to ineffective initiatives that do not provide solutions. Initiatives about young refugees, but without young refugees should be avoided. Refugee youth should be part of the solution and should participate in identifying problems, devising solutions and implementing them. The empowerment of young refugees as rights holders strengthens their capacity as responsible citizens, as well as their relations with duty-bearers, especially public authorities.

Non-discrimination

Young refugees have to deal with discrimination in every aspect of their lives. The label 'refugee', which is embedded within a negative narrative reinforced by the media and some political groups, often dominates other peoples' views about young refugees. Terrorism and radical extremism are often conflated with refugees by the media, in most cases without any correspondence to the reality. This leads to prejudice and discrimination, causing hopelessness and de-motivation among young refugees, and sometimes exposing them to extremist groups.

Populist and nationalist movements in Europe remain a source of concern as they project a distorted view of refugees in society, resulting in the stereotyping of refugees as a risk for society and breeding a "refugee phobia" which threatens democratic security and the safety and well-being of refugees. This is aggravated by the terrorist attacks that have hit cities across Europe and fuels xenophobic attitudes and measures. We should not let terrorists divide us, nor give up fundamental rights and freedoms in the name of security. Building walls and fences is not a solution to humanitarian situations.

Discrimination should be addressed through a holistic approach. The governments and political parties should work with the media to address the issue. Young refugees and host communities should be supported in challenging the negative narrative and in combating hate speech. The approaches of the White Paper on 'Intercultural Dialogue' remain especially valuable, and the examples of activists for human rights in the No Hate Speech Movement campaign are particularly inspiring. More needs to be done. Discrimination is not acceptable anywhere, online or offline.

Unaccompanied minors in transition

Unaccompanied or separated minors are an especially vulnerable category of young refugees and a growing source of concern. Losing basic rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child overnight when they turn 18, these refugee children in transition should be supported through durable solutions and institutional support. Along with basic rights such as access to housing, food, education, healthcare, and employment, they should also be

provided with adequate protection from trafficking and abuse and with psychological support and counselling.

Undocumented refugees

Undocumented refugees often have no access to any basic rights such as food, healthcare, and housing; they may sometimes rely only on charities and non-governmental organisations in non-sustainable forms. Many participants noted with regret that despite the gravity of the issue, undocumented refugees are not on the political agenda and at best are conveniently ignored". Left outside the protection of the legal framework, undocumented refugees are easy targets for criminal groups.

Conflict transformation

Most of the refugee participants who were involved in the activity had a Syrian background or were the result of armed conflicts. Awareness of the situation of refugees and support for their integration must go hand in hand with support for conflict resolution and transformation initiatives based on non-violence, peace-building and reconciliation; included in this should be the role of arms trade and its proliferation. The participants were particularly concerned with the persistence of other armed conflicts, their "invisibility" or perpetuation, such as in Afghanistan, Yemen and countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Conflict transformation initiatives are essential for refugees to be able to return, but these can only be used and carried out alongside guarantees of effective and lasting safety and reconciliation.

Principles for Action

In order to contribute to solving the above-mentioned challenges, the participants discussed multifaceted work across Council of Europe countries, as well as taking shared responsibilities. They identified the following directions of work for facilitating the social inclusion of young refugees and promoting intercultural dialogue:

- Promoting human rights education for newcomers and local communities, including schools
- Sharing good practices among Council of Europe countries to streamline and decrease bureaucratic barriers faced by young refugees
- Encouraging co-operation among NGOs working with young refugees to share best practices and learn from each other
- Working with the media to fight discrimination and labelling
- Supporting the involvement of refugee youth in decision-making processes regarding projects and policies concerning refugees
- Supporting further integration of young refugees into education, notably higher education;
- Promoting intercultural dialogue projects involving both members of host communities and young refugees
- Promoting integration of young refugees through entrepreneurship.

Follow-up

The participants devised 10 projects that they committed to pursue and implement with a view to being part of the change. They expect and request that the co-organisers and partners continue to support initiatives aimed at empowering young refugees and young people in general through institutional support, as well as providing feedback and advice to the project ideas which they developed during the summer school. The Council of Europe should support their work for Human Rights Education and intercultural learning through the provision of educational resources and opportunities for further learning.