



Brief description

The youth section is the largest voluntary youth NGO in Bulgaria. They consider the participation of students - volunteers as medical orderlies in the Balkan and the First World Wars as the beginning of the organization of which they were very proud. Another significant campaign from the beginning period was to collect aid for the starving population in the Volga region. Gradually their activities expanded towards health education and first aid, which remain their priorities today. Under communism they initiated the new anti-alcoholism movement, organized anti-smoking campaigns, planting trees and helping lonely elderly people. During the transition period they began working in shelters for homeless children and are trained on prevention of AIDS and drug addictions, which were unknown to the population or hidden for political reasons under the old regime. At present the Youth section has spread their activities even further, have better infrastructure and publish a magazine. For many young people it is an attempt to find a stability for themselves in the chaos of changes and an opportunity to participate and influence public life and be significant to the society. For others, it is a value-guidance, which directs their lives towards the "public good". Members do not receive any fees; they finance their activities through donations and projects which they manage to win in competition with similar organizations for funding from the Plovdiv Municipality or foreign donors. They work together with state institutions and local government, and with other NGOs. A small management team and many volunteers aged 14-30, more girls than boys and more school students than university students, rarely working youth. They have an office in the city centre.

What we learned about participation

The focus of our observation was a period of anti-AIDS campaigning by a group of 7-8 volunteers. In terms of implementation, we observed the so-called Freedom March (celebrating the European Day against Human Trafficking); and the different manifestations of the anti-AIDS campaign in a lecture in front of the Agrarian University students, on the main street and in the lobby of one of the Plovdiv malls.

Participation gains legitimacy if it happens in an organisation that has prestige.

The Youth section certainly benefits from being a well-known and prestigious organization of international origin which makes it easier for new people to join it. Unlike many other youth groups that strongly depend on the energy of one or several persons to function, here the network is, in some sense, self-moving.

Group practices of young people from the section are, first, guided by the Charter of the umbrella organization and the values and principles listed in it (compassion and

tolerance at the core), and second, always under the supervision of the management team of this organization. Based on them wide-ranging activities are created in three directions - social support activities, health education, and first aid provision.

Practices include: raising funds; visiting sick children in clinics and children from orphanages where they organize entertainment like 'Pyjamas party', drawing, reading, etc.; visiting and helping elderly people in their homes or in nursing homes; marches and parades; information campaigns.

Participation can change the meanings of spaces.

This extract from research field notes shows how young people momentarily adapt the meanings of the city's spaces:

"The volunteers are active literally all around the city [...]. They occupy new territories. Young people construct their own space; they fill the urban infrastructure with new meanings."

Key Challenges Identified

Young people locate themselves in a particular set of values in conflict with those of others. For example, one's own noble self-giving (often repeated in the conversations) was highlighted through the opposition with and derogation of others: benefit-seeking young people who accepted volunteering as a way to improve their CVs and use the activities as a bonus when applying for university or job.

The numerous initiatives of the group were, to some extent, marked by *hyper-activism*, or otherwise put, by almost breathless jumping from preparation of one event to realization of another one. In some accounts, it was reflected as such and defined as burnout that was gathering together too many stressful factors. But most often, it was a cause of pride and even rivalry. The other side of this was noted by one of the researchers: *"They were proceeding rapidly from one issue to another: nothing seemed to keep their attention for long."*