

**WORLD PROGRAM OF ACTION FOR YOUTH
(WPAY)**

*“Full and Effective Participation of youth in the life of
society and in decision-making”*

ITALY

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INTRODUCTION

The revision of WPAY poses new questions and challenges for the analysis of the Italian situation during the period 1995-2005. The most interesting area to be evaluated is the one concerning national youth policies, youth empowerment and participation.

This report aims at highlighting the national situation during this period, and above all, wants to discuss the measures implemented and what is still needed.

The WPAY provides different areas to be discussed within its framework, including youth employment, globalization and intergenerational dialogue. For what concerns area 10 (Full and Effective Participation of Youth in the life of Society and in Decision-making), it presents six different points governments agreed to work on back in 1995. These are as follows:

- Action 1

Governments agreed to “Improving access to information in order to enable young people to make better use of their opportunities to participate in decision-making”

- Action 2

Governments agreed to “Developing and/or strengthening opportunities for young people to learn their rights and responsibilities”

- Action 3

Governments agreed to “Encouraging and promoting youth associations through financial, educational and technical support and promotion of their activities”

- Action 4

Governments agreed to “Taking into account the contributions of youth in designing, implementing and evaluating national policies and plans affecting their concerns”

- Action 5

Governments agreed to “Encouraging increased national, regional and international cooperation and exchange between youth organizations”

- Action 6

Governments agreed to “Strengthening the involvement of young people in international forums, inter alia, by considering the including of youth representatives in their national delegations to the General Assembly”

Each action is then described in respect to our national situation, the programs implemented and the lack of appropriate laws or tools.

This report has intentionally been written in a plain language and addresses the topics in a straightforward and concise way in order to present schematically the most important elements of the current situation.

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Action 1

Governments agreed to “Improving access to information in order to enable young people to make better use of their opportunities to participate in decision-making”

On November 25th 2003 the Council of Europe drafted a Resolution to be observed by all the participating countries, Italy included. The Resolution addresses the role that information plays in promoting youth participation, and recommends a greater access to information, an improved quality and the participation of youths themselves in creating the information. All of the national Institutions have understood the importance of information, and promote it on different levels: European, national and local. Although the Resolution is fairly recent, Italy promoted a national program called “Informagiovani” back in 1982, aimed at helping young people becoming aware of the opportunities available to them. This program was actually based on former experiences and experiments taking place in France and Belgium, and represented the first attempt to establish a national youth policy. In fact, local authorities tried to implement a form of policy that is normally left to central government authorities, in other countries. This implied that the final outcome of the intervention was strictly bonded to the availability and consensus of those operating on local authorities’ boards. Nowadays there are over 600 structures established all over Italy (and the number grows annually) both in major cities and smaller centres, providing information on areas such as training and education, employment, health, culture and leisure, both on a national level and European one, to young people aged 14-29. The Informagiovani centres can be administered by private groups, the public administration or through a private-public partnership; according to the situation. Although these centres provide a full spectrum of information, there is no information about international (non-European) opportunities available to youths. As a matter of fact, Italy does not have a government body dealing with youth policies, a legalized national policy, and there is no official Youth Council (there is a National Youth Forum, but it has not been acknowledged by a proper legislation, hence not having any form of power) either. This implies that not much attention is given to youth consultations or other forms of youth participation and inclusion on international levels (especially the UN). General information on International Organizations is given by SIOI, the Italian Society for International Organizations; their youth section, called MSOI, organizes workshops, debates, MUN simulations and study trip, but provides no information on how to get involved at international youth panels and events. MSOI is also the only national association to be member of WFUNA Youth (the World Forum of UN Associations).

At the same time, because of the actual situation, there are no ways for youths to participate in national decision-making processes. On the other side, young people can get involved in their local decision-making process, through a series of initiatives that local town halls organize: these include, city youth councils, city youth forums and similar. All of their decisions and proposals are then evaluated by supervisors and brought to the attention of the mayor.

Action 2

Governments agreed to “Developing and/or strengthening opportunities for young people to learn their rights and responsibilities”

When it comes to learn rights and responsibilities, the place where things normally get done is school, at primary, junior high and high school level. All levels promote teaching curricula addressing topics such as democracy, the State and its components, and citizenship through education. The curricula are decided by the Ministry of Education, but some sort of freedom is given to the teachers responsible to implement them. Hence, the teaching methodology, ways of addressing the topics and possible actions that students can undertake are all dependant on the teacher her/himself. Thus, there is no a single way or model followed throughout the country. It also goes without saying that there are also various kind of activities that can be proposed to students, like studying how the Parliament works or how to be involved in citizen-created groups. Youths also learn their rights as citizens through online sections that both, the Chamber and the Senate have produced for them: like how a law is enacted or how the Parliament works. There are even annual visits for school to take part into a legislative session and talk to deputies. Another way to learn about rights and responsibilities is by involving local NGOs, but this is an initiative which solely depends on single teachers and institutions. Things may change very soon, though, as 2005 has been proclaimed “Year of Citizenship through Education” all over Europe. This would entail a greater attention to “Civic Education”, and would encourage both the school system and the authorities to invest more on this theme. For example, ISPI, the Institute for International Political Studies, has launched an online initiative to foster a greater sense of citizenship and democracy for high school students.

All over Italy it can be said that the “Civic Education” curriculum is quite good, but being too theoretical, it does not get youths involved to act for the improvement of their own communities, thus wasting all the resources that youth represents to tackle the issues that the government itself cannot solve.

Action 3

Governments agreed to “Encouraging and promoting youth associations through financial, educational and technical support and promotion of their activities”

With no doubts it can be stated that the Italian government has worked a lot toward the implementation of this action, and the results benefit a lot of associations and group working on youth-related issues. The main support to be provided is through technical and financial help, all the scopes of action are included. The Ministry of Welfare has established two specific sections to deal with it:

- Help to associations covering general interest: it provides funds, technical and logistical support, links national, regional and local associations and promoted researches and studies over associations on behalf of European Institutions
- the European Program “Gioventù” (established in 2000, 1031/2000/CE) a program promoting non-formal and life-long education, European youth exchanges and intercultural learning for individuals or groups of youths aged 15-25

It should be noted that thanks to the partnership with European Institutions, programs like “Gioventù” cover almost all the needs that youth associations may have, and at the same time, it promotes a greater understanding of the European identity and final aim. However, what youth association still lacks of is educational support and a general promotion of their activities. Education and training skills are often developed and passed on by the association itself, thus incurring in training and materials costs. Although the costs may be covered thanks to the sponsorships provided by European programs, not all of them have the prerequisites to apply and to get funds. At the same time, there is still little support for what concerns promotion, both on a national and European basis. Unless the organisation is a very large one or well-known, there is no way to be backed by the government or its ministries for promotion. The association has to rely on its own abilities and finances to promote a program or an action nation-wide. Unlike what happens in other countries, associations still have a marginal role in developing social and educational programs that get a broader coverage in this country.

Action 4

Governments agreed to “Taking into account the contributions of youth in designing, implementing and evaluating national policies and plans affecting their concerns”

It is indeed sad to highlight the total lack of actions undertaken by the government in this respect. There is still no National Youth Council, and there is no sign of establishing one in the near future. Although a proper Council is still far to be established, a few years ago forty NGOs working on youth issues have agreed to set up the so-called “Forum Nazionale dei Giovani” (National Youth Forum), an umbrella institution to deal with youth policy formulation at the national level. This approach is, however, a bottom-up attempt to try to legitimate youths and their role in the society, although it has not formally been recognized by a government institution, such as the Parliament. The National Youth Forum has recently drafted its guidelines, and these include: the formulation of an ad-hoc national youth policy, networking among NGOs and the Parliament, the representation on Italian youths at all the major international events. Last year the Forum has been chosen as the only national umbrella organisation to represent Italian youths within the European Youth Forum, a pan-European initiative to gather all national youth councils. However, the Forum itself has some limits because of its structure: of all the organizations which adhere to it, more than half have a political aim (Young Socialists, for example) and the remaining have a religious background (Young Catholic Students, Scouts). There is no representation of other NGOs working in field such as Human Rights or Environment, thus reducing the scope of youths’ interests representation. Moreover, the National Youth Forum does not share nor publicize international events, with the general public (those youths who do not belong to any of its constituting organizations), and this is unacceptable for a Forum which aims to represent Italian youth at national and international levels. The Forum has not reached a fully recognized national status as of yet, but there is a smaller forum which made its way into the legislation: Forum Regione Campania (a Forum for Campania, a region in Southern Italy). This Forum has the same aims of the National one (youth representation and empowerment), but its scope of action is not as broad as the other one. The regional Forum has been fully acknowledged and supported by an ad-hoc regional legislation, and it is the only one of this kind in Italy, as of now.

On the other hand, youths have greater opportunities to be heard and express your views and opinions at the local level, thanks to city youth councils (Consigli Comunali Ragazzi-CCR). These councils are modelled on previous experiences drawn from French town councils, and are modelled over the principle enlisted in the “Charter of youth participation in local and regional public life”. They are created by local authorities to include youth perspectives on issues affecting the whole

community, and seem to be the only relevant initiative of its kind to work so effectively to promote youth participation. Although operating at a micro-level, the city councils are a proof that youths can and want to be involved in those topics whose outcomes affect them. CCR have been a constant feature of many cities all over Italy, and their number is growing rapidly. There are even councils aimed at children, because to many it is really important to include the broadest spectrum possible of ages and backgrounds (moreover, child participation is widely encouraged by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 12). The CCR can take on two different forms: Council or Forum. Councils provide to all youth associations with an opportunity to debate and draft proposals on youths, and whose outcomes are directly reported to the town authorities for implementation. This implies that the youth council has a positive power to establish new programs or initiative to help local young people. On the other hand, the local youth forum is more flexible than the youth council, is composed by individuals (not associations only) and has a consultative role, primarily, with no power in respect to local authorities.

The government has no formally encouraged nor promoted this kind of initiatives, leaving the decision to establish the council to local authorities. However there is a national networking scheme managed by “Democrazia in Erba”, an association that promotes CCR, provides training to local authorities and help running the councils.

Action 5

Governments agreed to “Encouraging increased national, regional and international cooperation and exchange between youth organizations”

Unfortunately, there are no elements to be used in the analysis of this Action for what concerns the national and regional cooperation of youth organizations. This implies that the Government did not provide any form of help or incentive to provide a link between organizations or associations working on similar issues. Most of the times, in fact, links and partnerships are forged between organisation without the help of institutions and authorities.

International cooperation is instead widely promoted and encouraged by European programs such as “Gioventù” (please see above) or the “EVS” (the European Voluntary Service), another European program which proposes youths to volunteer their time and skills in another country for a period of a few months. These are the most widely known programs, and the most widely advertised too.

Action 6

Governments agreed to “ Strengthening the involvement of young people in international forums, inter alia, by considering the including of youth representatives in their national delegations to the General Assembly”

With no doubts it can be stated that the Government has started no action towards this direction. Because of the lack of a fully integrated and politically supported National Youth Council, there is little information available about international programs and opportunities unrelated to the European Union. To give an example, every two years the International Youth Parliament (an Oxfam’s initiative aimed at empowering and training young people to bring about a positive change in their communities) chooses delegates to represent their countries on issues such as Education, Human Rights, Sustainable Development and so on. Italy only has three delegates for this term (2004-2006), and the IYP is not popular at all in this country. Information plays a key role in determining youth involvement and empowerment, this is something which goes without saying. Most of the NGOs contacted to take part in this revision deal with youth representation and participation, and yet they had no idea of what the WPAY was. At the same time, neither the government nor ministries let people know about initiatives like this one. When it comes to represent Italy at major meetings or UN panels, things get even worse. Italy does not have a formal process to officially select young people to attend and represent the country at higher international levels. Because of this, no Italian youth delegation has ever been included in the major delegation to the General Assembly (although Italy signed up Resolutions 36/17 in 1981, 50/81 in 1995, 56/117 in 2001 and 58/133 in 2004 to attest the inclusion of youths in his major delegation). At the same time, even major NGOs with branches in Italy do not promote youth participation at international levels, as action is oftentimes only local/ national. It has also been argued that youth participation at international meetings would be of little or no use, as most youths do not possess sufficient language skills to deal with specific issues. The National Youth Forum has started to networking and taking some steps in this direction, but as it aims at sending only its higher representatives, leaving no space for other young people and without organising national consultations on the topics it will address at the meetings, the efficacy of its action presents some doubts.

CONCLUSION

The report presented the Italian situation and the programs implemented during the period suggested by the WPAY (1995-2005), according to the Actions that most governments agreed to implement during these years.

Many actions have been undertaken by the government at the European level, and these include youth exchanges, volunteering, networking, financial and technical support. At the national level, the country still lacks of a proper national youth policy, but the situation may change soon, as some forty youth-related NGOs has established an umbrella organization to address this specific issues, the National Youth Forum. There is no doubt that it will require some time in order to coordinate and direct all of their effort towards this direction. At the regional and local level, instead youths have a greater role in defining the programs and initiatives aimed at them, and the exceptional response and outcome could be used to implement similar schemes at the national level too, in the future. Sadly, no action has been officially undertaken to guarantee the presence of Italian youths at major UN panels or consultations (including the annual General Assembly), but things will likely change once that an official youth policy and Youth Council have been agreed upon. Information also has to play a greater role to promote youth empowerment and inclusion at all levels, to foster greater understanding and involvement of young people in the public life.

There is no doubt that things are bound to change in the near future, but to balance the current situation youths should be given the opportunity to take part in the processes themselves, in order to bring in their perspectives and insights on those very issues that relate to their life and future as thoroughly active and responsible citizens.

SOURCES

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