RAY LEARN
Research project on organisational development and
learning organisations in the European youth sector

NATIONAL REPORT: LATVIA

Which explicit strategies are pursued by youth sector organisations, networks and institutions to foster their organisational learning and strengthen their organisational development?

About deliberate and targeted work to foster the organisational learning and strengthen organisational development we can only speak in the case of large organizations. These are staff-sustained organisations with a hierarchical internal structure, long experience in working with youth. Only in case of such organisations we can talk about sustainable and successive youth work. Whereas, for small, volunteer-driven organisations youth work is a situative – if there is funding for specific projects, work takes place; if it is not available, the activities of the organizations are practically stopped. Small organisations are also characterized by the fact that they are most often composed of 1-2 persons, hence in these cases we can likely speak about an individual learning and capacity building of particular persons rather than for organisational development.

The learning and strengthening organisational development of large organisations is determined by the activities defined in the organisation's development strategy and the internal hierarchy of the organisations. At the same time, it should be emphasised that none of the interviewed organisations have a separate strategy for organisational learning or capacity building. Organisational development depends more on the availability of funding, not from learning opportunities as such. None of the organisations also have any practice of the internal transfer of knowledge gained in the projects. It can be said that, in terms of specific projects, the beneficiaries are those who are directly involved in the projects, and not the representatives of the organisations as a whole. At the same time, it should be stressed that, in the case of large organisations, the benefits are also implicit – even if just a particular individual from the organisation participated in specific projects, acquired competencies and knowledge can be used for other projects, as well. Namely, knowledge and competencies are accumulated at an individual, personal level, not in the organisation as a whole.

In the case of organisations working within specific municipalities, it is often observed that their action strategy is considered to be a youth policy planning document of the particular municipality. In the case of small organisations, they often even do not have their own development strategy (only the statutes of the association), their work is mostly dependent on individual interests and objectives of the founders of the association (usually 1 or 2 persons).

At the same time, it should be stressed that the representatives of large and small organisations assess the participation in international projects as important contribution for the organisational development, even if it is often the individual development of particular persons and not so much organisational development as such. This aspect is problematic in those cases when the individuals leave the particular organisations (and such cases are very common), thus the overall level of development and capacity of the organisation is significantly aggravated.

Which implicit practices foster the organisational learning and strengthen the organisational development of youth sector organisations, networks and institutions?

As the previous question states, as there are no particular explicit strategies to foster organisational learning and strengthen organisational development, the benefits of organizational development raise most often directly from implicit practices. That means, the organisational development is largely (in large organisations) or fully (in small organisations) dependent on the individual learning and capacity-building experience of particular participants. When assessing such aspect, the most effective practices are participation in projects related to the opportunities for personal development or for raising professional competencies. Indirectly organisational development is also facilitated by the practice of some organisations to hold regular internal meetings or seminars on project implementation or results, but it should be emphasised that such practices are very rare and generally not long-term.

Assessing in overall – possibility of the organisational learning and the organisational development is strengthened if organisations have sufficient funding to ensure sustainability, to ensure regular activities. As for the absolute majority of organisations it is not available, most of their working time is devoted to fundraising, which, in turn, entails a significant bureaucratic burden on the activities of the organisations. Organisations often devote more time to implementing bureaucratic requirements rather than to developing and implementing project content itself.

It should also be stressed that about organisational development we can only speak in cases when the organisation has a relatively high number of members and regular involvement in projects or activities. In this case, even at a variable personnel composition we can observe organisational development as such. Whereas, in case of a very small number of personnel and carried out activities benefits are more personal, rather than organisational.

How do organisational learning and development strategies and practices of certain types of youth sector organisations, networks and institutions differ?

The main difference is between those institutions that have permanent municipal or state budget funding and NGOs. Project funding forms 30-40% of the budget for municipal and/or state organisations; 80-100% of the budget for NGOs. The first type of organisations has stronger institutional capacity, more stable staff and capacity to get engaged in more large-scale projects. Whereas, the activities of NGOs depend entirely on the availability of project funding, and the development of sustainable organisations in this case is practically impossible to talk about. As long as the most essential organisational development limiter is funding (un)availability, meantime we can only talk about the organisational learning just relatively. At the same time, it should be emphasised that individual benefits of particular persons are also relevant for the youth sector in general, even if the particular person changes his/ her place of work, his/ her acquired knowledge and competencies are essential and have a great benefit elsewhere as well (including outside the youth sector).

Which conditions, both systemic and organisational, favour or hinder organisational learning and development processes of youth sector organisations, networks and institutions?

In a systemic context, it is possible to speak of two essential conditions restricting the organisational development. Firstly, it is the availability of funding, which is already discussed previously in more detail. It should be stressed that the problem of availability of funding should be seen in two respects: basic funding for the operational activities of the organisation and continuity, regularity and long-term availability of funding. In the first case, the matter is about the ability of organisations to maintain continuous work, regular activities (at present, this is done

on a voluntary basis, but such strategy has not proved its sustainability, involved persons cannot do that in long term). In the latter case, the matter is about the sustainability of particular projects and activities, where an organisation successfully implements activities or projects, the sustainability of their results could be ensured by successive equivalent activities, but most often they are not financed (content-like projects are very rarely supported several times). Secondly, and this partly explains the problems of availability of funding, organisations still encounter a lack of awareness among politicians and executives about the importance and benefits of youth work. In Latvia this is particularly acute at the municipal level, where only a minority of municipalities understand why youth work and its sustainability should be supported. Consequently, to a large extent the daily work of organisations also consists of the need to convince regularly that their work is meaningful.

In turn, several problem areas can be identified at organisational level. Firstly, the overworking and the 'burning-out' of the persons involved in youth work. For ensuring regular operational work of organisation, it requires to have as many projects as possible to ensure funding for the long-term functioning of the organisation. This leads to overworking and, in the medium term, to 'burnout'; as a result, some part of organisations also stops their activities if the leading staff decide not to continue working in the youth field. Secondly, personnel turnover. In Latvia, it is typical that people working in the youth field (including working as volunteers) stay in one workplace just for very short period of time. For example, at municipal level people involved in youth field work approximately only 2-3 years, consequently sustainability and the successiveness of youth work are practically impossible. Thirdly, most organisations indicate the low interest and activity of young people as a problem. In order to involve young people in different activities, organisations need to invest very much in the work of persuasion and interest maintenance. But since the activities of organisations most often take place from project to project, the interest of young people and the willingness to participate is not maintained in the long term. When the project ends, the participation of young people is not continued because of the lack of successive activities and projects. These challenges at the level of organisations can also be summarised as a problem of planning and implementing sustainable and regular youth work. This is also evidenced by the fact that in recent years the total number of youth work implementing organisations in Latvia has declined.