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## Youth and Social Cohesion

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to present and interpret the findings of a survey carried out for the YEU-International, a nonprofit organization based in Brussels. The survey was meant to assess different aspects related to social cohesion, and was conducted on groups of young people from 16 countries. Among the major findings, we can enumerate the fact that the majority of youngsters have strong ties with their families; they are willing to get involved in civic activities; they have no gender prejudices; they do not trust public institutions; school plays an important role in their learning about human rights; economic prosperity creates a better framework for social cohesion; the most stringent social problems are poverty and access to jobs; the majority of respondents have participated at least once in a non-formal education programme, which mainly improved their communication skills, their interest in social issues and concerns of their community, their team – working skills, their intercultural communication, their organization/planning skills, their decision-making abilities and their confidence/autonomy.

**Keywords:** youth; social cohesion; survey; human rights; non-formal education.

**JEL classification:** Z13.

### 1. Introduction

The present study is based on a survey commissioned by the YEU-International, a nonprofit organization based in Brussels (<http://www.yeu-international.org/>). Youth for Exchange and Understanding (YEU) works to promote peace, understanding and co-operation between the young people of the world, in a spirit of respect for human rights. The survey was conducted by Prof. PhD. Manuela Epure.

The thematic area of the survey refers to social cohesion and the way young people position themselves in relation to it. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation (OECD) defines social cohesion as a cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its

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members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility [OECD, 2011]. Social cohesion includes the Social Cohesion Triangle: Social Capital, Social Inclusion and Social Mobility. Social capital also has an important "downside" [Portes and Landholt, 1996]: communities, groups or networks which are isolated, parochial, or working at cross-purposes to society's collective interests (e.g. drug cartels, corruption rackets) can actually hinder economic and social development.

The survey is founded on the premises that the three aspects of social cohesion can be measured and quantified. The main objectives of the survey have been:

To develop new tools/activities by using non-formal education as methodology in order to support young people's understanding of social cohesion processes, in the creation of a society of equal opportunities, better understanding of different generations of human rights and struggle against discrimination based on personal characteristics;

To motivate youth activists to develop and implement local actions, which would serve as examples of good practices;

To ensure the transfer of innovations from European to national/local level and vice-versa by assuring the quality of the non-formal education provided.

In order to understand a community's needs, a needs assessment survey was conducted in 16 countries (EU and non-EU): Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, FYROM/Macedonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, Poland, Portugal and Serbia. Because the survey encompassed various geographical areas, the link which connected the subjects was represented by their age: they were all in the prime of their life.

The questionnaire was distributed online with the help and dedication of organisations from the YEU-International's network. The distribution was in line with the study objectives: 16 countries were targeted, the average response rate was above 50% for all questions, and that illustrates a successful data collection. The countries were not equally represented as number of responses, but the responses per country allows us to make assumptions to verify and to draw conclusions.

The online questionnaire was available from April, 15-May, 21, 2014, and 1497 responses were collected, which ensures the survey's representativeness. The responses were exported and analysed by specialised software. They were assessed and then each variable was graphically represented.

## 2. The Survey Findings

The survey questionnaire was designed to reveal the specific community needs, related to social cohesion, in order to provide the basis for discussing the situation in targeted countries and understanding the processes and/or problems of the vulnerable groups and/or the community in general. Questions are grouped in **four thematic domains**:

1. The Social Cohesion concept (social capital, social inclusion and social mobility) - perceptions and values;
2. Human rights (with special emphasis on social rights, intercultural dialogue) – awareness;
3. Non-formal education (experiences, benefits, new skills);

#### 4. The country's youth profile.

The set of questions regarding social cohesion explores the respondents' awareness of its components: social inclusion, social mobility and social capital. The perceptions of social and moral values are seen through the eyes of young people and the survey aims to identify the level of awareness regarding the concepts, the degree of importance they hold in young people's everyday life, and how that might affect them in their adult life.

The questions on human rights are intended to identify the subjects' level of awareness and how and where they have learned about human rights. A special attention was paid to respondents' perception about the human rights problem at community/country level, the youth's willingness to promote human rights in their community on voluntarily basis, the responsibility of respecting human rights, the improvements needed so that their community may function better in the future. The variables mentioned were designed to be understandable and easy to assess by young people.

Non-formal education (NFE) can be seen as any educational activity outside the established formal system – whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity- that is intended to serve identifiable learning clientele and learning objectives [Combs, et al. 1973].

The questions regarding NFE were designed to illustrate: the past experience of respondents regarding NFE; description of the NFE programmes and their learning experience; their attitude towards non-formal education benefits; building trust among NFE attendees and how these programs can be improved. Moreover, respondents were asked to identify the key competencies and skills that have improved through NFE programmes and how beneficial they were, generally speaking.

Special attention was paid to the soft skills developed through NFE programmes, and how these skills are contributing to the enhancement of their chances on the job market.

A set of questions were introduced in order to develop a country's youth profile, starting with a series of general profile questions such as: gender, age, education, employment status, country of residence, etc.

Some of the profiling questions were constructed around psychological profile: creativity, social status and money related issues, personal security, dedication to social well-being, willingness to contribute to building a better world, adventure and risk taking profile, respecting social behavioural norms etc.

Profiling also consists in how young respondents see themselves, and how they relate to the world. The intention was to identify different categories of youth, and how they act and think about the community needs and specificity.

After the online data collection, the responses were analysed and the most relevant conclusions are:

1. The results confirm the assumption that youth under 25 have strong ties with their family and friends, and leisure time plays an important role in everyday activities. They have no serious commitments to work or religion, are not interested at all in politics and community.
2. The respondents are not happy to live next to drug addicts, heavy drinkers and around 10-17% of them are reluctant to gypsies, homosexuals, and AIDS carriers.

3. Women's independency is related directly to having a job which allows them to earn money and to act according to their own will. Looking at the percentage of female respondents, one can easily identify the fact that female respondents influenced the trend of responses.
4. There are no differences between genders when we discuss better political leadership performances. It means that the young generation has no gender prejudices when discussing about leadership in politics. Leadership is perceived as being equally represented, men and women make good political leaders according to their abilities and profile background, and not because of their gender characteristics. Gender issues in politics are clearly spotted by the young respondents. They strongly believe that men and women have similar performances in politics.
5. Both males and females are entitled to higher education – the majority of young people that took the survey agree on that.
6. The figures show without any doubt that, generally speaking, people can be trusted. 62.9% of respondents are optimistic and they appreciate the positive behaviour of people in their community. A lot of good things for the community can be built based on trust and individual commitment.
7. When respondents were asked further details about trust, a higher percentage (70.5 %) of respondents say that people in their own community can be trusted most of the time under certain circumstances. Social cohesion is better developed when the level of trust between individuals is significantly higher.
8. The majority of respondents, 53.7 % (34.2% + 19.5%), are keen to get involved in civic activities, which creates the assumption that civic activism is easily accepted by young people, and also supports the need of a more intensive non-formal education, addressing the civic engagement.
9. The level of trust in public institutions is low. 36.8% of respondents deny that they trust them, and 50.7% contend that "public institutions are trustworthy but only sometimes, and under some circumstances". A clear YES was indicated by 4.0 % of respondents, which generally means a very low level of trust.
10. "Economic prosperity creates a better framework for Social Cohesion," appreciate 55.3% of respondents, which is a significant percentage, compared to only 9.5% of negative answers.
11. The most visible opportunities for better social integration are: language classes (65.3%), cultural events (73.6%), volunteering, (72%), free access to education, religion-charity (41.9%), and intercultural dialogue (45.4%). The distribution of responses per country is an analysis highly desirable in order to suggest new formal education programs tailored for each country's needs, in order to stimulate social integration.
12. The most stringent social problems that young respondents identified were: poverty and access to jobs, which are actually very strong related. Young people are aware of the fact that "ethnicity-based conflicts" ranked 3, and "poor communication" ranked 4 reflects the need for a better communication. The communication skills should be better developed and an improvement in non-formal education programmes in this area is welcome.
13. Young people's perception of the human rights situation in their own country is based on their own life experience. 32.9 % of respondents appreciate that human rights are a major problem in their country, but a similar percentage, 26.0% of

them, say that it is a minor problem. The level of knowledge of human rights thematic area, and their limited life experience influence the young people's perception, and the survey results reflect it. A more accurate perception depends on the level of awareness of human rights.

14. The most attractive NFE programmes are those about learning and observing society and human rights. The programmes are also beneficial for developing youth's opinion and their objective perceptions. For young people, being actively engaged in civic activities means a lot, and their enthusiasm and willingness should be supported by an appropriate level of awareness.
15. The vast majority of respondents agree (34%) and fully agree (44.9%) that school plays an important role in learning about human rights. 43.7% of the respondents believe that volunteering is the best way to learn about the reality of human rights. The responses show that young people (74.3%) would like to have more opportunities to talk about human rights, and they would prefer to do that in school.
16. The main reason for learning about Human rights is "to be able to take advantage of them". A large number of young respondents (40% agree and 34.2% fully agree) contend that this motivation keeps their interest alive. Young people directly associate the learning process with the most tangible outputs, so it is very important for many of them to see the immediate advantages of learning.
17. Analyzing the positive responses distribution, we conclude the following: there is a real need for more opportunities to talk about human rights in schools/communities. People should learn more about human rights and there is a need for non-formal education programmes on this topic. Young respondents agreed upon the fact that they should get more involved in respecting human rights in their community/country.
18. 61.5% of respondents have participated in a NFE programme at least once. The percentage is relevant in order to get into further details and ask more precise opinions about their NFE experience.
19. The respondents' opinion about NFE programmes is formed based on their own experiences, which can be described as follows:
  - NFE programme "was organized on voluntarily bases" 30.6% - which is good;
  - NFE programme "was meeting their interests" for 27.1% of respondents – but there is a lot room for improvements in this direction;
  - NFE programme "was about sharing experiences" for 27.8% of respondents.
20. The young people appreciate that NFE programmes they attended were not so much learner-centered, and did not involve building trust/ friendship among participants in different vulnerable groups. Therefore, one can say that the survey results suggest that there is need for some major improvements in designing non-formal education, especially in the abovementioned areas.
21. The majority of respondents declare that a NFE programme have improved their "communication skills" (48.1% of answers) and their "interest in social issues and concerns of their community" (35.9%). More than 30.5 % of respondents agree upon the fact that NFE programmes "have increased their ability to take advantage of what they have learned".
22. The survey results show that the most cited soft skills are:

- 60.9% of respondents agree that NFE programmes have improved their “team – working” skills to a great extent;
- 46.3% of respondents indicate that NFE programmes have improved their “intercultural communication”;
- 43.7% of respondents have improved their “organization/planning” skills, and 38.2 % of them have noticed improvements of their “decision-making” abilities, and 35.0% of them, improvements of their “confidence/autonomy” level.

### 3. Conclusion

One can conclude that young generation understands the role of social cohesion, which is a good start for planning activities that sustain this trend on long run. Generally speaking, young people are keen to take action, but adequate training programmes, be they formal or non-formal (although the present article mainly highlights the advantages carried by non-formal education with regard to social cohesion) are highly desirable in order to increase the effectiveness of such human potential.

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