

Young people and the Environment in Europe

Across Europe a large number of excellent environmental projects are being initiated and run by young people. The projects are characterised by imaginativeness, spontaneity, flexibility and a great deal of enthusiasm. Because of the diversity of the work being carried out by young people it is often very difficult to gain an overview. This lack of overview in the 'jungle' of different projects and organisations, coupled with a lack of insight into the working methods of young people, has led to a situation where the potential of the 'youth environment movement' as a future-oriented, politically active movement is often underestimated and insufficiently supported.

In 1997, on the basis of this theory, the CANOPUS Foundation commissioned a study of youth involvement in environmental work in Europe.

GOAL

The aim of the study was not to provide a comprehensive overview of all the organisations in Europe. It focuses on organisations which are part of national and international networks, which work in a project-oriented and political manner and which have environmental protection as their main aim.

The study is not a project commissioned by public institutions, nor is it an academic analysis or an advertising brochure for the youth environment movement. Rather it aims to provide an insight into the projects and working methods of the young people and to give an idea of the problems with which they have to grapple. It is intended to be a tool for dialogue between young people and interested funders and to provide recommendations about how effective support might be provided and what criteria are suitable in order to assess youth environmental projects appropriately.

RESULTS - RANGE AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The study covers seven international organisations, as well as NGOs from 24 European countries. Clear regional differences can be identified. For instance, in Northern Europe there tend to be strong, federally organised associations where the age of the members ranges between 14 and 25 years. In contrast, young people in Southern Europe tend to be integrated into adult organisations. In addition, there is no obvious division in the focus of the Southern European organisations between social and ecological issues. In further contrast, the environmental movement in Central and Eastern Europe is less than ten years old, so there are no organisational structures which are comparable to those found in Northern Europe and no separate youth organisations.

The existence of national youth environment organisations depends on factors such as cultural influences, the age of the environmental movement, the social status of young people and the priorities of the organisations. The level of international networking is

affected by methods of communication and language, as well as by financial support and other available resources.

PROBLEMS FACED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

The problems which are faced by young people in environmental organisations include:

- considerable fluctuations in terms of members
- their low level of experience due to age
- the challenge of maintaining the continuity of project work in spite of declining financial support for the core activities of the organisation
- the fact that responsibility and experience are concentrated on a few members who are often too overworked to be able to pass it on
- the lack of interest in environmental work from their peers
- questioning of the credibility and quality of their project work.

Consequently the youth environment organisations are looking for new organisational forms which are more project-oriented, less hierarchical and not exclusively focused on ecology and/or youth.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FUNDERS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Young people experience considerably more difficulties in raising money for their projects than adults. In addition to the problems listed above, the reasons for this include the high level of matching funding which is required by funders and heavy pressure on young people to be more innovative and professional in the promotion of their project ideas.

For this reason, the study includes a recommendation about how youth projects can be effectively supported, in terms both of how the funding is structured and of the evaluation of project content. Priority is given to:

- swifter, less bureaucratic funding
- help with core funding for organisations
- training in the form of 'capacity building' and 'training for trainers' in the areas of communication, media and PR work
- support of international work, including communication and the translation and distribution of information materials.

In spite of all these difficulties there are some excellent projects, a selection of which are described in this study.

PROJECT RESULTS

The results of the surveys of experts and the hour-long interviews with representatives of youth environment organisations from all over Europe were complemented by a two-day conference in Haarlem (the Netherlands). At the conference two projects were drawn up which will form the focus for the activities of the CANOPUS Foundation in the field of youth work:

1. The 'WebSpace Fund Project': the plan is to set up a fund which will support projects by providing small amounts of money at short notice. The fund is to be financed through internet advertising and/or sponsorship and also provides a symbol of quality.
2. 'ThinkTank 2000': youth organisations should be supported in their new methods of working and their need for professional training should be addressed.

Their enthusiasm and their abilities are enormous and their commitment to a better world is impressive. They deserve all the help available so that they can develop their own strengths and go out into the world walking tall, rather than as charity cases, for the fate of that world will one day be in the hands of their generation.

In November 1999 this study was presented to a group of young people and funders. During this conference a joint resolution was drawn up which is addressed at the Deutscher Stiftungsverband (German Association of Trusts).