

Empowerment and Participation as universal categories in intercultural practices of international youth promotion

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Historical Background

In the middle of the nineties German development cooperation became aware of a discrepancy between the demographic situation in partner countries with children and youth forming the majority of the population and their representation or rather neglect as a specific target group of projects. On the basis of the demographic development in these regions youth have been depicted in contrasting ways. The more positive outlook sees the “youth hub” as a demographic window that “can mobilize young people's potential and launch an economic and social transformation” (State of the world report 2003: UNFPA, 2004: 5) given appropriate investments in health and education. Others see in the same statistics a security threatening “youth bulge” made up of excessive numbers of unemployed young people with a high potential for conflict and crisis.

In accordance with this dual perception of youth as both the symbol of society's future and its victims at risk' of succumbing to lives of violence, drug dependence and moral degeneracy International organizations and development agencies discovered youth as a target group in its own right. The GTZ (German agency for development cooperation) has been one of the earliest advocates for putting youth on the international agenda, but meanwhile many international organizations have developed a specific approach towards youth including among others The World Bank, The International Labor Organization (ILO), UNICEF, and UNESCO.

Since the inception of youth promotion projects in 1997 the GTZ alone has established more than 200 children and youth programs in 65 countries in the areas of employment, health, education, political participation and crisis prevention. Across sectors empowerment and participation function both as an objective and as a method and strategy of youth promotion projects.

Challenges of intercultural practices in youth promotion

Concepts of youth and thus also youth promotion have political implications. In the context of development cooperation this is in accordance with a paradigm shift from supposedly neutral technical cooperation to a more explicit political approach, (i.e. promoting human rights, civil order, political participation and democratization). In particular empowerment and participation as objectives, strategy and core values of these projects function as a focal point in which diverse pedagogical and political ideas about the role of youth in general and the role of diverse groups of youth in society crystallize and cause conflict. The potential for conflict is heightened by the coincidence of the political turn and the the cultural turn in development politics, that postulated the acknowledgment of diversity and the call for culturally sensitive programs. The result is a contradiction between promoting the foreign organization's ownership of and control over projects while at the same time adhering to certain values, objectives and methods.

Research Questions

In my presentation I want to elaborate on the practical challenges this diversity

poses for the application of empowerment and participation on two levels: At first I am concerned with the practical implementation on the level of the target group:

- How does the socio-cultural context affect the acceptance and practice of empowerment and participation among young people?
- What aspects need to be taken into consideration in order to develop programs that are tailored to a particular target group?
- How is this reflected in program development?

The second level of my analysis deals with the cooperating parties involved: projects of youth promotion are situated in a field of tension often referred to as a „client triangle“ - composed of a contractor (in this case the GTZ), cooperating governmental and non-governmental organizations in partner countries, and a target group. The client triangle is a difficult sphere of activity because diverse concepts of youth and diverse concepts of youth promotion have to be negotiated between all parties involved. Questions of interest were here:

- How do the diverse culturally informed and normative concepts of youth and youth promotion - with particular emphasis on empowerment and participation - within the client triangle relate?
- What kind of conflicts arise?
- And how are the conflicts dealt with?

In my presentation I want to illustrate the meaning of the socio-cultural context for empowerment and participation with examples from my data. The focus will be on the interrelated nature of different culturally informed concepts of youth and youth promotion – and its implications for the intercultural practice of youth promotion. The data I am referring to is based on interviews with project managers of youth promotion projects of the GTZ in countries in Africa, Latin America and South Eastern Europe. Subsequently I would like to discuss benefits and limitations of the two concepts as universal categories and talk about possibilities of their culturally sensitive application.