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Healthy City? Is the youngest generation interested at all?

Context

(Healthy) Cities suffers from a common disinterest of the youngest generation in local community development, policy and politics that on the other hand influence their lives in many ways: education quality, leisure facilities, sport activities, safety etc. There exist traditional ways that cities use for raising interest of youth in public issues such as student parliaments or various public campaigns. But there is a need for more direct and tangible opportunity offering young people an attractive and accessible way of how to participate and implement their own ideas within rather bureaucratic and abstract decision-making systems taking place in municipalities.

Rationale

Healthy Cities should represent a good platform for engaging this important target group and create new policy venues in order to raise awareness about health issues and social determinants and secure that youngest generation will have the knowledge, skills and most importantly opportunity to influence their future lives and environment that they will live in. Intensive communication and collaboration with the youngest generations is considered as crucial for the future sustainable development of Litoměřice municipality as a Healthy City.

Description

Litoměřice has systematically worked in public health and sustainability since 2002. The municipality monitors and evaluates its progress and tries to analyse strengths and weaknesses in terms of long term sustainable development and health. Involvement of young generation has emerged to be one of the weak points but on the other hand it was an extraordinary challenge for seeking new ways on how to more engage youth in the city development.

Currently, Litoměřice is one of the leaders in working with young generation in the Czechia and organises various events for young generation. This change was launched back in 2002 just at the same time when Litoměřice joined Healthy Cities of the Czech Republic network (HCCZ) and started to follow WHO Phase IV methodology. For quite a long time, engagement of youth was dependent on cooperation of the city with local environmental centres that created a platform for Youth Parliament and provided organisational and methodological support. In this platform, each of the primary and secondary schools was represented. However, in 2010, a new idea, coming directly from members of the Youth Parliament, emerged and Youth Healthy City Forum was created. The origin of this new platform relates to the long-term and successful Healthy City Forums organised by the municipality for the general public according to HCCZ methodology. Even more intensive work with young generation brought about Youth's Table establishment in 2012 that became part of the Healthy City Forums. Apart from regular thematic tables such as transport or environment where people discussed problems and challenges of the community development, there was a specific table dedicated to youth. This allowed young people to be part of the public discussions and to influence the top ten problems defined for the whole municipality. The latest development started with 2015 represent School Forums organised in 6 primary schools

in Litoměřice. This platform completes the overall system for young generation engagement policy and focus both on life in the school and the city. A detailed description of the platforms follows.

Youth parliament and Youth Healthy City Forum

In 2002 no regular platform existed for youth engagement in Litoměřice. Therefore, it was an important factor that an initiative came from local NGO called Environmental Centre North that provided the first support for students to work together. The idea was inspired by the National Youth Parliament and European Youth Parliament movements that had been functioning for some time and were considered as one of the most influential youth platforms in that time. Litoměřice Youth Parliament (LYP) was, however, a rather non-formal group of young people who were active and wanted to work together and to discuss issues they were interested in. From time to time, representatives of the LYP met with city councillors and discussed different aspects of city life and also members of LYP participated as guests in the local parliament meetings in order to see the formal procedures of the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the basic support was still provided by the NGO and there was no formalised procedure that would allow the LYP's outputs to be part of the local politics.

An important milestone came in 2010 when the official Youth Healthy City Forum (YHCF) was established and became a formal part of the overall city policy regarding public engagement. This platform was supported directly by the city hall and this also allowed more intensive work with the outputs coming from YHCF's discussions. For YHCF, a special methodological guide was created and further developed and subsequently also presented national-wide to other Healthy Cities in Czechia. The YHCF is organised every year and follows the HCCZ methodology used in Healthy Cities for organising public debates. During YHCF meetings, there are usually 5 thematic round tables such as environment, transport, safety and so on, where young people can discuss their problems, ideas, suggestions and so on. The age of the participants is not limited, however, experience shows that students of preliminary and secondary schools and university students compose the majority of participants. Also, a representative of the city hall (usually a politician and head of respective city hall department) is present at each of the thematic tables to answer student's questions and react to other requirements. The YHCF has different phases and it is well prepared and organised. First, all potential participants are invited in advance by various communication channels (internet, invitation letters to all schools, leaflets, posters, city website and other general media) and usually around 40 people participate in the forum. An independent facilitator is invited to lead the discussion according to the rules and ensures all participants are treated equally and have opportunity to express their ideas. Every table is equipped with large format papers where participants take notes and flipcharts and other necessary technical equipment is provided. Participants are advised to identify main problems and wishes and to write them down on the paper. Within a limited time they also have to define 2 most important problems they would like to present at the final plenary discussion where all thematic tables are presented together. Finally, once the plenary discussion is completed and the top 10 problems (2 for each of 5 tables) presented, all participants can give their votes and final ranking of the top 10 problems is defined.

There are several important aspects related to the YHCF results. First, the top problems coming from the YHCF are discussed again at the Youth's Table which is part of the Healthy City Forum organised for general public (see below). It is interesting, that almost every time some of the outputs coming from the youth become part of the top 10 problems defined for the whole city during the general Healthy City Forum. This shows

that young generation deals with problems or have ideas that are also reflected by adult population and are important for the overall city development. Second, the top 10 problems are publicly declared and are verified by a survey among young people using both online and paper questionnaires distributed in schools and organisations dedicated to youth. This is not a representative survey but mainly an opportunity for others who could not participate directly in the YHCF to express their preferences. For instance, in 2015 there were 777 completed valid forms obtained and 180 people voted online. Each person had 2 votes, the same as in the YHCF meeting.

Third, every year, the top 10 problems are submitted to the city council and it is part of the official decisions where city councillors discuss the problems raised and, most importantly, decide who is responsible to deal with these problems at the city hall level. Finally, the city mayor presents every year during the initial phase of the meeting how the city has dealt with ideas that came from the last YHCF meeting and explains what suggestions or requirements were realised and what is still missing and why. This is a critical part of the whole process as people who are active and want to participate in the city development see that the YHCF is not a kind of rhetorical exercise but a real platform that provides important inputs into the decision-making of the city council and provides very useful feedback for the mayor and councillor.

A list of top 10 according to the survey in schools in 2015 is given in table below.

TOP TEN PROBLEMS OF LITOMĚŘICE from the YOUTH POINT OF VIEW

ISSUES	1. Basic School and Nursery School	Masaryk Primary School	Na Valech Primary School	Havlíčková Primary School	Ladova Primary School	B. Němcové Primary School	Lingua	1. KŠPA School	Ekonom School	Online	Total points
Public Wi-fi in Jiraskovy Park	26	47	46	51	55	81	24	15	37	18	400
Wall for graffiti	30	13	32	18	35	20	14	10	20	10	202
New Path for Litoměřice landmarks	2	7	19	2	14	12	4	10	5	12	87
Drinking fountain on Střelecký Island	6	26	65	17	22	33	8	39	7	14	237
Greenery planting	23	24	19	11	24	33	16	26	13	10	199
Purchasing bikes for city police	3	8	1	4	4	2	2	8	6	3	41
Reconstruction of Richard Repository Entrance and cleaning the surroundings	10	12	9	12	24	22	6	14	3	17	129
Reconstruction of Mostná hora Nature trail	11	7	15	4	12	12	5	15	4	8	93
Purchasing of musical instruments for city musical school	0	5	7	0	7	14	4	6	0	4	47
Installation of traffic lights countdown	8	15	17	27	26	27	15	27	17	13	192
Total points	119	162	230	146	223	256	98	170	112	109	1625

Youth´s Table

Healthy Cities of the Czech Republic National Network organised 57 public hearings called Healthy City Forum in 2016 with almost 4 500 participants. It is therefore the biggest officially organised platform for discussion on problems in cities and towns in Czechia. Since 2002, this public meeting - Healthy City Forum – Top 10 problems of Litoměřice - has been regularly organised also in Litoměřice and usually 200+ citizens participate in this event. It was one of the requirements of the youth who took part in the YHCF that they would officially participate in the general forum and discuss directly with adults what they see as the most important issues in the city life. Therefore, since 2012, there is always one thematic table dedicated to the youth so currently 7 thematic tables plus 1 Youth´s Table (YT) are organised in the general Healthy City Forum (HCF). This YT is open for any young person, however, usually members of the Youth Parliament attend the meeting and present also problems defined by the YHCF but also coming from the School Forums (see also below). As mentioned above, some of the YT outputs are regularly ranked among the top 10 issues defined during the general HCF which proves that it was a good idea to create this extra table dedicated for the youth and allow them to discuss, but also to raise arguments supporting, their suggestions and ideas.

The HCF is organised similarly to the YHCF so no details on the methodology will be given here.

Photo: Youth´s Table as part of the Healthy City Forum (third from the bottom on the right-hand site)

School Forums

Despite having already very good opportunities for young people in how to participate in public debates and how to be involved in the decision-making processes, there was still one aspect missing. The youth have found out that properly organised debate can also help them to better the situation in their own schools where they spend most of their time. Therefore, in 2015 the Healthy City office together with the politician responsible for Healthy City agenda at the city hall (former teacher) invented a new methodology for organising School Forums. This was an original idea which took over the basic methodology from the YHCF and adapted it on specific conditions in primary schools. Complex guide describes the whole process on how to prepare and organise these meetings and gather ideas and proposals from pupils and how to further systematically work with these outputs and transfer them either to the school directors or to the local decision-makers, i.e. city councillors.

The event takes 2.5-3 hours and it is usually organised during morning hours instead of teaching and it takes place in the mid-term because the outputs can be projected in the budget for the next year. It is organised in all 6 primary schools in Litoměřice and it is intended for pupils of age 12-16 (5th to 9th class). There are 30-50 pupils participating according to the size of the school every year. There is always an external (but can be also internal) facilitator present organising the debate, and representatives of the school (teachers, director) and representatives of the city hall (mayor, vice-mayors or councillors) also attend.

The meeting itself is divided in two parts. One part concerns the internal life of the school e.g. classes, school life, rules, teaching etc. The other part is more focused on outer life, i.e. general development of the city and its environment. It is important to understand that working with pupils differs from regular adult meetings so there is

always kind of game or/and a quiz at the beginning of the meeting that provides an opportunity for getting know each other and to create comfortable, informal and stimulating atmosphere. Similarly to the Youth Healthy City Forum, pupils are organised into several groups but there is no topic given for each table so pupils can discuss whatever they want. They are, however, advised to write down their ideas in a limited time and divide them into two groups – “what I like in my school” and “what could be done better”. Again, participants have to pick up 2 main priorities that will be presented at the plenary part of the meeting. This part takes 30 min plus a 15 min break. During the break, the facilitator gathers all priorities and put them on one flipchart page. Pupils then vote and a final ranking of the top problems is defined. Similarly to general Youth Healthy City Forum, the top 10 problems is verified by the school survey and subsequently the list of verified problems is published.

The overall outputs have two basic forms. First, there is a list of verified problems and wishes that is handed over to the director of the given school and he or she has to decide what he or she would do about it. Nonetheless, there are always some problems on the list that can be handled by pupils themselves (for example tidiness in school) so pupils are given support from the school management to solve them if they like. The second list of outputs concerning the city development is also important. Since 2016 the top priority from the School Forum becomes part of the top 10 problems of the Youth Healthy City Forum (i.e. there is altogether 10+6 problems) and has a chance to be part also of the top 10 problems of the city and the general Healthy City Forum and thus will be presented to the local government and solved in some way.

Again, this an important aspect of the overall process and participants can see how decision makers (either on the city or the school level) work with the outputs and if they care about what the youngest generation thinks and wants.

Achievements

Litoměřice have been working with youth since the very beginning when they become part of the Healthy City family and has developed its own methodology on how to organise different platforms for involvement of the young generation. The methodology includes both arguments for convincing school directors to organise this forum at the very beginning, describes how to successfully realise this event and also shows ways on how to end up with concrete measures at the end of the process including monitoring and evaluation. This development has taken more than ten years and it is still evolving. Today, there are 6 School Forums at all basic schools involving altogether about 140 pupils and young students, one Youth Healthy City Forum open for participants from all school levels including universities, and one Youth´s Table as part of the general Healthy City Forum organised every year. Youth Parliament is still working as a permanent and sort of umbrella platform for active school pupils and students throughout the year. It is important that all three special platforms are formally supported and some of them are organised and guaranteed by the city council and politicians participated at the events regularly. This allows the outputs being included among top priorities for the city development and have a real chance to be financially supported by the city budget and realised.

In order to further support and develop this process the city council introduced a new scheme for public participation in 2015 – participatory budget – that is also open for youth who can submit their ideas and seek for wider support by the public and get funding for their innovative projects up to € 6000.

This approach to young generation engagement and methodology developed by the city of Litoměřice has also been introduced national wide at many conferences and

workshops and successfully implemented in other Healthy Cities with assistance of the Litoměřice Healthy City coordinator and politician.

Conclusions

Youth Healthy City Forum and School Forum as well as Youth´s Table have proved to be a very effective and innovative way in how to attract and keep attention of the youngest generation which is very often resistant to traditional policy tools. This process also perfectly fits within the general goals and system of the Healthy Cities and might contribute to long term sustainability and community resilience by positively influencing young generation and increasing their responsibility for development of their own city. This tool, furthermore, can be combined with other more traditional but also innovative tools such as participatory budgeting that create synergies and multiply positive effects of each of these tools. Some of the concrete outputs also help the city and school management to better deal with issues such as healthy nutrition or safety. For instance, sugar and high-fat snacks in vending machines at schools was replaced with healthier meals in 2015. This was one of the requirements of the nutrition experts but, as it emerged during discussions among pupils, also a wish of the youth - which finally allowed and facilitated this change. The impact of this measure will be further monitored and evaluated as diabetes has recently proved to be serious problem as indicated in analyses of the City Health Development Plan.

School Forums in Litoměřice is also connected to other topic such as intergenerational collaboration or fair trade (Fair Trade Schools) and it is an important part of the overall mobilisation of the community.

It is also important to raise a more general aspect of youth active involvement. The outputs coming from the various youth platforms show that young generation deal with problems or have ideas that are also reflected by the adult population and are important for the overall city development. For instance, among the priorities was a requirement to build starting flats for young families or planting new trees in the city. Discussions also provide good feedback to the political leaders and public officials and help to formulate better or more appropriate policies and create new synergies that would not have otherwise happened. Finally, these youth forums are the best teaching aid for civics classes and serve as a good tool for discussion, argumentation, learning respect and reaching consensus which are needed for building democratic and resilient communities.