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## THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN SERBIA

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the issue of sustainable development and its key principles and goals. By adopting the National Strategy for Sustainable Development, the Republic of Serbia has accepted that sustainable development should become its permanent development commitment. For this paper, two principles of the strategy are identified through which the role of citizens in achieving sustainable development goals in the country can be seen: 1) open and democratic society - citizen participation in decision-making, ensuring civil rights, access to information and participation in decision making; 2) involvement in social processes, ie integration of citizens into society. A special focus of the work is placed on the youth population as a special category that should contribute to sustainable development in the country through its participation and activism. The Republic of Serbia has to some extent ensured the role of young people in achieving the goals of sustainable development by conceiving the National Strategy for Youth for the period from 2015 to 2025. The strategy is based on the strategic commitment of the state to work with and for young people. The strategy calls for continuous and systematic investment in youth development and the establishment of a partnership between youth and the state in order to increase active participation in society, encourage social integration and ensure the involvement of young people in the development of youth policy. The participation of young people in society, ie their role in achieving the goals of sustainable development, as viewed through the results of the latest research on the position and needs of young people in the Republic of Serbia conducted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in the period 2015-2019. The analysis of the results aimed to establish the extent to which the basic ideas and principles of sustainable development were present in these researches, as well as the role of young people in the realization of these principles. The research showed that in 2015, young people showed a majority disinterest in political events in the country and low social activism. The situation worsened in 2016 because an even larger number of young people were not interested in participating in the work of an organization and events in the country. The turnaround followed in 2017 because a majority growth of young people's interest in political events in the country was established, but the position remained that young people are powerless in terms of influencing political processes and decisions. The following year, the interest of young people decreased again, and in 2019, the majority of disinterest was established again. The results of this research can build on existing knowledge in this area. Many studies have already shown that young people in Serbia are insufficiently involved in decision-making (Kuka, 2013, Veljković, 2017) that they have accumulated energy for social activism, but that they often do not know how to channel it (Marković, 2004), that they are not interested in politics or work to be politically informed (Popadić et al., 2019), that the basic trend is present among young people in Serbia, the trend of alienation from the political and social dynamics of society (Jarić & Živadinović, 2012), that reduced political activity of young people is a significant obstacle to their full integration social system (Jarić & Živadinović, 2012) and that Serbia still has a lot of work to do in terms of improving the quality of youth policies, strengthening their implementation and monitoring (Mojsilović, 2018).

**Keywords:** youth, sustainable development, social activism, participation

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development is comprehensive and complex. Although there is no generally accepted definition of the term, the definition of the World Environment and Development Commission is mostly cited in the literature: "Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Besides, the definition of the European Union Sustainable Development Strategy is most often cited: "Sustainable development is a development based on a pattern of production and consumption that does not degrade natural resources, protects the environment, promotes equal distribution of goods to all and reduces poverty" (Dimić Vugec & Pavić-Rogošić, 2015).

In 2008, the Republic of Serbia adopted the National Strategy for Sustainable Development<sup>40</sup> and thus accepted that sustainable development should become its permanent development commitment. The National Sustainable

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<sup>40</sup> Nacionalna strategija održivog razvoja, Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije, br. 57/2007.

Development Strategy defines sustainable development as a goal-oriented, long-term, continuous, comprehensive and synergistic process that affects all aspects of life (economic, social, environmental and institutional) at all levels. Sustainable development implies the development of models that meet the socio-economic needs and interests of citizens in a quality manner, and at the same time eliminate or significantly reduce the impacts that threaten or harm the environment and natural resources.

In addition to the many principles on which the National Strategy for Sustainable Development is based, for the purposes of this paper, two principles have been identified: 1) open and democratic society - citizen participation in decision-making, ensuring civil rights, access to information and participation in decision-making; 2) involvement in social processes, ie integration of citizens into society. Therefore, a very important goal of sustainable development is to inform the public and its participation in decision-making.

A special focus of the work is placed on the youth population as a special category that should contribute to sustainable development in the country through its participation and activism. The Republic of Serbia has to some extent ensured the role of young people in achieving the goals of sustainable development by conceiving the National Strategy for Youth<sup>41</sup> for the period from 2015 to 2025. The strategy is based on the strategic commitment of the state to work with and for young people. The strategy calls for continuous and systematic investment in youth development and the establishment of a partnership between youth and the state to increase active participation in society, encourage social integration and ensure the involvement of young people in youth policy development.

Young people have a special and important role to play in the social and economic development of today's society. They are the present and future of society, its driving force and resource of innovation. Their participation and activism in public associations are possible only with the creation of various, efficient mechanisms that will meet the needs of young people (implementation of various development projects, development of local strategic documents, work of working groups, youth offices, decision making ...). Associations that carry out youth activities perform an important social and political function, but despite that, there is no stimulating environment for the development of the youth civil sector. Intensive work should be done to increase youth activism. The most important factor for strengthening the capacity of young people is certainly funding, ie various types of state programs that provide this type of support (career counseling, non-formal education, training for trainers, education, acquisition of skills and knowledge ...). with key principles of sustainable local development and ways of involvement in the development of the social community. Insufficient involvement of young people in activities, as well as in decision-making, stems from the fact that there is not enough information on how they can do so. However, the lack of information is not the only problem that leads to this. The lack of sufficiently developed mechanisms for citizen participation in decision-making on problems and insufficient connections between different sectors certainly hinders youth activism. The low level of social activism of young people in the Republic of Serbia is also shown by the research conducted annually by the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

There is a need to find ways to raise young people's awareness of the need and opportunities for their contribution to sustainable development. It is necessary to continuously and systematically invest in the development of young people and to establish a partnership between young people and the state to increase active participation in society, encourage social integration and ensure the involvement of young people in the development of youth policy. Their participation in creating sustainable plans for the future would increase their sense of responsibility for the consequences of decisions they make about the future of their communities.

To achieve this, greater commitment is needed in the field of youth education on sustainable development to be better acquainted with the principles and process of planning and decision-making on sustainable development of the communities in which they live, as well as society as a whole. Young people need to be educated to develop their ways of active participation in the public life of the community because civic engagement is what essentially distinguishes young people in the 21st century. The adoption of this knowledge is necessary for the ideas they want to launch in communities to be consistent and lead to sustainable development. Using the acquired knowledge and skills, young people need to act and initiate changes in their communities. They must take responsibility for dealing with the problems they see in social communities, as well as for more studious consideration and finding solutions to those problems. The development of a sustainable society is a process of continuous learning in which questions are asked and dilemmas are explored, and answers and solutions are tested and enriched with new experiences.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to the methodological approach and method of data collection, the paper is a product of qualitative research because a qualitative method of research and data collection was used - document analysis (desk analysis). It was used to analyze several studies on the position of young people in the Republic of Serbia, based on which it is

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<sup>41</sup> Nacionalna strategija za mlade za period od 2015-2025.godine, Službeni glasnik RS br. 22/2015.

possible to conclude what role young people played in achieving the goals of sustainable development in the country.

Research on the position and needs of young people in the Republic of Serbia has been conducted for ten years to assess the current situation in areas of strategic interest to young people defined in the National Youth Strategy. All nine strategic goals are assessed in detail, however, for this paper, only the strategic goal concerning youth activism is taken into account, ie, improvement of the legal and political framework of inclusion and participation in decision-making processes and youth policy development.

All surveys were conducted on a representative national sample of 1,500 young respondents aged 15 to 30 years. For the purposes of this paper, only the last five surveys (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019) were taken into account.

### 3. RESULTS

The basic findings of the 2015 survey<sup>42</sup> showed that the majority of young people (61.2%) were uninterested in being informed about socio-political events in Serbia. Low social activism was established because over 90% of respondents had not participated in the work of any political or non-governmental organization dealing with environmental protection in the past year. Nearly half of eligible voters (44%) have voted in local, provincial, parliamentary or presidential elections in the past four years. Half of the respondents did not know how to state the factor that discourages them from being more actively involved in social processes and changing society. The most frequently cited factors were lack of interest and the attitude that they could not change anything, while a smaller number cited the political situation, lack of time, corruption/crime. Only 14% of respondents were familiar with the role of the Youth Council, and the role of the local Youth Office (21%) was somewhat higher. A quarter of young people knew about the existence of the Youth Office in their municipality/city and only 7% of those who once used the services of the Youth Office on humanitarian activities, non-formal education, information, cultural and sports activities.

The 2016 survey<sup>43</sup> re-established low youth social activism because only 7% of young people in the last year participated in the work of a political organization active at the local level or in the work of an informal group dealing with environmental protection. When asked whether they consider themselves a socially active young person, 31% of young people thought they were socially active, but only 10% of young people declared themselves as members of a political party. Interestingly, the reasons why young people did not get involved in initiatives aimed at positive change in social life (at the national or local level) are most often lack of time, the opinion that their opinion will not be heard or respected, or the opinion that they are not competent enough to get involved. Only 31% of young people knew about the existence of the Youth Office in the city and only 17% used the services of the office, most often for information purposes. Ways of active participation of young people that would be more in line with the needs of young people are involved in decision-making, volunteering and humanitarian work, debates, workshops and seminars.

The research from 2017 is especially important because it showed an increase in the interest of young people in political events - 60.4% of young people declared themselves interested. However, almost half of the respondents (48.8%) thought that they have no influence on political processes and decisions and that the level of youth participation in decision-making is quite low. As many as 91% of young people believed that young people should participate in political decision-making processes (activism, proposing solutions, voting, initiatives, through youth institutions, participation in civil society organizations), while 58% of young people believed that through activism and participation in the work of the association can improve the situation in society. Besides, young people thought that the general situation in the country could be improved by voting in elections (41% of young people think they can while 35% think they can't) and as the main motives for voting in elections, they stated: activism, desire for better tomorrow, for a better future, contribution to democracy, performing civic duty, influencing one's future (Stojanović, 2017).

A survey from 2018 showed that young people were still interested in political events (51.9%) but to a lesser extent than before. As last year, a large number of young people felt that they did not influence political processes and decisions, while only 0.9% of young people thought that they had an influence. It is interesting to point out the majority position of young people (71%) that political decisions can be influenced only through political parties, which can be a serious indicator of how young people see the decision-making process. As for voting in elections, 32.4% 31% of young people occasionally vote, while 36.6% of young people never vote. As reasons why they do not vote, they stated that all politicians are the same and do not work in the interest of citizens (38.4%), as well as that all politicians (29.5%) are tired of them (Stojanović, 2018).

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<sup>42</sup> Nina Media Research, „Istraživanje položaja i potreba mladih u Republici Srbiji”, Beograd, 2015.p.162.

<sup>43</sup> Nina Media Research, „Istraživanje položaja i potreba mladih u Republici Srbiji”, Beograd, 2016. p.82.

The research from 2019<sup>44</sup> is also very important because it has been established that young people are not interested again for informing about socio-political events (53% of young people), as well as for active participation in socio-political events in Serbia (63% of young people). As far as voting in the elections is concerned, the number of young people who voted dropped this year - only 42% of young people voted. When the focus was on the plans of young people to go to the next parliamentary elections in the spring of 2020, 44% of young people stated that they did not intend to go to the next elections, and only 17% of young people said they would vote. As many as 59% of young people pointed out that they would not be ready to engage in the work of a body that initiates or makes decisions of importance to young people, and as reasons why they would not be ready to engage, young people stated: lack of information about their work, distrust that these bodies work in the interest of citizens, the opinion that their engagement would not change anything. Also worrying is the fact that 57% of young people are not ready to be more actively involved in initiatives aimed at positive change in social life, at the national or local community level. The only positive thing is that this year the number of young people who know that there is a Youth Office in their place has increased (43%). However, almost half of young people (49%) still say that they still do not know about the existence of such an Office. Among young people who know about the existence of the Office, only 14% of them used its services.

Unfortunately, a more detailed consideration of the findings of this research (depending on gender, age, marital status, educational level) goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it can be a starting assumption for some of the following research.

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS

The significance of the results of this paper lies in the fact that it provides a comprehensive overview of social activities and the participation of young people in Serbia in the last five years. After presenting the main findings of the research aimed at assessing the activism of young people in Serbia, ie their role in achieving sustainable development, it is possible to conceptualize the social framework and determine the attitudes of young people towards socio-political events in Serbia. Furthermore, it is possible to assess their participation in the work of a political or non-governmental organization, as well as their willingness to engage in society and ensure the sustainable development of society. Considering all this, we get a broader picture of the role of young people in achieving the goals of sustainable development in the period from 2015 to 2019.

It turned out that in 2015, young people were mostly uninterested in political events in the country, and due to that lack of interest, they were not ready for any social activism because it was established that most young people did not participate in the work of any organization. They were discouraged from getting involved in changing society because they thought they could not change anything. The situation was even worse in 2016 because an even larger number of young people stated that they did not participate in the work of any organization. As the main reasons why they did not get involved in initiatives aimed at positive change in social life, young people again felt that their opinion would not be heard or respected, or the opinion that they were not competent enough to get involved. The only positive thing was that in a year the number of young people who were familiar with the existence of the local Youth Office increased (from 21% to 31%), as well as the number of young people who used the services of the Office (from 7% to 17%). As for the situation in 2017, a turnaround occurred because most young people have now shown interest in political developments in the country, but felt they had no influence on political processes and decisions. Although they believed that young people should participate in the political decision-making process and thus improve the situation in society, the level of youth participation in decision-making was quite low. According to them, in addition to activism and participation in the work of the association, the situation in the society can be improved by voting in the elections. In 2018, young people also retained their interest in politics and political events, but to a somewhat lesser extent (the number of those interested decreased from 60.4% to 51.9%). This year, an even larger number of young people felt that they did not influence political processes and decisions (the number increased by 10%). They stated that all politicians are the same, that they do not work in the interest of the citizens and that all politicians are tired of them. The main finding of this research was that the majority of young people believed that political decisions could be influenced exclusively through political parties. What was unexpected is the fact that the research from 2019 re-established the majority disinterest of young people in socio-political events in the country, as well as in participation in those events. The only positive thing is that in 2019, the number of young people who know that there is a Youth Office in their place increased - while in 2016, 31% of them knew about the existence of Youth Office, in 2017 35%, in 2018 33%, in 2019. 43% of respondents said that there is a Youth Office in their place.

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<sup>44</sup> CeSID Research, Položaj i potrebe mladih u Republici Srbiji, Beograd, 2019.



The results of this research can build on existing knowledge in this area. Many studies have already shown that young people in Serbia are insufficiently involved in decision-making. Specifically, in the field of environmental protection, young people do not have sufficient knowledge about the environment or a developed awareness of the importance of the environment and sustainable development (Veljković, 2017). Some previous research on the lives of young people in Serbia has shown that young people have accumulated energy for social activism, but often do not know how to channel it; political parties do not attract them, and they do not have enough information about other types of social activism (Marković, 2004).

The Youth in Serbia 2018/2019 survey also showed that young people are not interested in politics, do not discuss politics, nor do they try to be politically informed. State and society institutions do not enjoy the trust of young people, and this is especially true for political parties. Although dissatisfaction with the state of democracy and democratic values is widespread in Serbia, there is still support for the democratic political system in general (Popadić et al., 2019).

The basic trend present among young people in Serbia is the trend of alienating young people from the political and social dynamics of the society of which they are a part. It seems that the largest number of young people decide on a strategy of distancing and consequent alienation from the social and political course of society within which they live, which is in line with previous research on this topic in this area (Jarić & Živadinović, 2012a). The reduced political activity of young people represents a significant obstacle to their full integration into the wider social system, because significant parts of this population, partly as a consequence of their political passivity, have been pushed out of it. Until political conditions are created in which a public space will be opened for understanding the position of young people from different social backgrounds in modern Serbian society and articulating their specific needs, it will not be possible to change the structural marginalization of this social group (Jarić & Živadinović, 2012).

A comparative analysis of youth policy in Serbia with youth policies in EU countries (Netherlands, Poland and Croatia) showed that Serbia still has a lot of work to do in terms of improving the quality of youth policies, strengthening their implementation and monitoring (Mojsilović, 2018).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this paper are certainly important and should serve for further conception and development of youth policy in the country. It turned out that the participation of young people in society is insufficient, although there is great interest. Youth policy should be improved and a supportive environment should be created in which the needs and potentials of young people will be recognized and their initiatives will be encouraged and respected. Young people should be enabled to participate in strategic decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. It is crucial to improve the social position of young people and create conditions for the realization of the rights and interests of young people in all areas. Conditions should be provided that will enable young people to reach their full potential and actively participate in society, contributing not only to their development but also to the development of society.

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