

## Seminar on the Health and Well-being of Young People Marly le Roi, 8-11 December 2008

The seminar was organised by the Youth Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, the Ministry of Health, Youth, Sports and Voluntary Organisations, in the framework of the French Presidency of the EU, in cooperation with the European Commission, the European Youth Forum and the two French Youth Councils. It took place in INJEP (National Institute for Youth and Popular Education), Marly le Roi, France on 8-11 December 2008.

The seminar theme was very broad and encompassed conceptual, applied as well as empirical work on the health and well-being of young people in Europe and beyond. The event was designed specifically to fit with a holistic approach, where all major stakeholders (researchers, practitioners and civil society actors, in particular international youth and health non-governmental organisations, institutions focused on health, policymakers) could provide their input.

The first day of the event (8 December 2008) was reserved for the meeting of a small group of researchers, practitioners and experts where the focus was research on health and well-being of young people. The researchers were from a wide range of perspectives, disciplines, orientations and backgrounds. In terms of discipline, the spread ranged from social work to psychology, from youth work to public health. The geographical spread was also wide: from Scotland to the Russian Federation.

This small group produced a set of general and focal points, and provided recommendations for the wider discussion in the following days. The group

emphasized the need for further research to strengthen the knowledge base and the dynamic nature of social forces that impact on young people. It was noted that the meaning of "well-being" may change from generation to generation and research needs to take young people's view into account. The group also stressed that the transition to adulthood is critical and there is a need to search for resilience-promoting factors.

The recommendations underscored the need to understand the social/cultural context that promotes or hinders healthy behaviors and development, and to consider the behaviors and attitudes of adults and particularly parental responses to changing societal dynamics. The recommendations emphasized the need to avoid seeing health as a professional matter or technical issue so that young people can be construed as agents of their own health. It is important to remember that "problem" or "unhealthy" behavior can be "healthy participation" in a given situation. A democracy needs meaningful participation from young people in all areas, including health and well-being. In this sense, young people's "problem behavior" can be a sign or resource for change. There is a need to see young people as assets rather than a burden. In line with these assessments, researchers need to employ qualitative methods, as well as quantitative methods, to uncover meanings, functions, identities, and subjective cause-effect relationships.

From a practical vantage point, youth-friendly approaches are needed. Peer education, for instance, can be a very effective tool in the area of health and well-being. Young people need to know



about risks, including those associated with health and well-being. If these risks are “normal” (i.e., normative), then there is a need to foster familiarity with risks – they should not be treated as taboos. Methods to support familiarity and awareness should be developed for various settings (e.g., schools, youth centers, etc.). Youth workers, in particular, can develop programs to help young people deal with “risky behaviour” without suffering major harm. More attention needs to be paid to conventional and new information technologies, which present multiple and salient risks to young people, and often promote health-compromising attitudes. Awareness of and ways to deal with these risks need to be a priority as new information technologies are globally available and very salient.

The second part of the seminar (9-11 December 2008) was designed to facilitate exchanges between policymakers, researchers, international youth and health non-governmental organisations as well as other practitioners and civil society actors, led to identifying a set of policy recommendations in the area of young people’s health and well-being. The participants represented all major stakeholders, different disciplines and backgrounds. In terms of geographical coverage, participants came from European Union countries and neighbouring regions.

The second day of the event (9 December 2008) began with a plenary where the officials clearly expressed the political will to improve the health and well-being of young people. A rich and insightful assessment of young people’s well-being and their existential trials and tribulations was provided by an invited expert. Conclusions and recommendations of the research meeting were presented to all participants.

Following the plenary, for a day and a half, the participants engaged in the task of discussing major issues and identifying a set of actionable policy recommendations in four workshops. The workshops were designed to cover major thematic areas in the area of young people’s health and well-being; namely, socioeconomic and structural factors, lifestyle factors, participation issues and the knowledge base. In each workshop, the participants identified major issues, major gaps in knowledge, practice and policy, and developed

recommendations that spoke to the major issues.

On the last day of the event (11 December 2008), conclusions and recommendations from each workshop were presented and discussed at the plenary meeting. The recommendations from the workshop on socioeconomic and structural factors focused on what needs to change in order to provide young people with a healthier society to live in. These included recommendations as to how to work with the media, how to strengthen the role of family and especially fathers, how to organise the work on public policies and the civil society in more youth-friendly manner and finally, how to provide an individual young person with tools and skills to cope with the challenges found in society.



The recommendations from the workshop on lifestyles focused on what needs to change in the way society treats young people (e.g. acceptance of young people, improved dialogue between youth and other generations and stakeholders), in formal and non-formal learning opportunities and in young people’s attitudes. The recommendations from

the workshop on participation focused on creating spaces and structures where all the actors can work together and equally influence the policies and decisions, and the means needed to provide these structures. The recommendations from the workshop on the knowledge base focused on improved dissemination of existing knowledge, structures needed for monitoring of health and well-being indicators across Europe, and major gaps in the research base.

Concluding remarks were provided by the representatives of the Youth Partnership, the European Commission and the Ministry of Health, Youth, Sports and Voluntary Organisations of France. The speakers underscored the challenge that much needs to be improved in young people’s health and well-being and expressed a firm commitment to developing youth and health policies considerate of the recommendations the seminar has produced.

More detailed report of the seminar will be finalised and made available on the Youth Partnership website. Also, a publication composed of research papers presented and debated on the first day of the event will be produced and disseminated.