

Building capacities and paving the way for EU integration: The role of SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre in increasing the quality of youth work in the Western Balkans

The field of youth in the Western Balkan has experienced dynamic progress in the last fifteen years. In addition to various achievements at the national level, countries have taken important steps towards harmonisation with the developments in European youth work and youth policy. Since its establishment in 2002, SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre has had the privilege to support the process of building capacities in the region and facilitate dialogue among various actors in the Western Balkan youth field and their other European counterparts.

Fifteen years ago the Western Balkan region was ever more struggling with the consequences of the 1990's conflicts and the aftermath of structural reforms following the fall of socialism a decade earlier. As a response, a number of civic initiatives had emerged in the region, yet the civil society as a whole remained fairly weak, primarily due to political instability and lack of national funding.

At that time, the European Union's YOUTH Programme contributed considerably to the efforts to consolidate an independent youth sector in the region, by supporting initiatives aimed at increasing young peoples' civic engagement and reopening their horizons towards other countries and cultures, in particular, towards Europe. Furthermore, following the Thessaloniki

Summit in 2003, in which the prospect for accession to the European Union for the Western Balkan countries was confirmed by the heads of States and Governments, the YOUTH (2000-2006), Youth in Action (2007-2013) and finally the Erasmus+ Youth in Action (2014-2020) Programmes became the single most important tools to facilitate the EU integration process in the field of youth.

The role of SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre in facilitating the cooperation with the Western Balkan region in the frame of these EU Programmes has evolved along with the overall development of European youth policy as it manifests itself in the Programmes' objectives and priorities, and along with the relevant developments in the region. The primary task of the centre in the beginning was to promote partnership-building between the Programme Countries and the Western Balkan countries in order for cooperation to take off the ground. However, within the past thirteen years, the SALTO SEE Resource Centre has developed into a much broader regional support structure, contributing to increasing the overall quality development of the Programmes' implementation in and with the Western Balkans, therefore effecting youth work and youth policy developments on a larger scale.

In 2011-2012 SALTO SEE Resource Centre carried out a study, aimed at investigating how the then ongoing Youth in Action Programme had influenced the involved individuals, organisations and wider communities²². The study clearly showed a positive effect of the Programme on a number of thematic and structural spheres, extending from the level of personal development of young people and youth work practitioners to the shaping of youth work and – to a lesser extent - national youth policies. Below the role of SALTO SEE Resource Centre in facilitating the process is further explored.

Increasing capacities and building competences in the field of youth

In the Western Balkans, youth work largely relies on small, youth-run organisations without stable funding and trained staff. This often leads to a lack of continuity and long term strategic goals. One of the highlights of the impact study was the increased level of professionalism and broadened organisational capacity through the participation in the Youth in Action Programme. Ever since the beginning, SALTO SEE Resource Centre acknowledged the need to provide systematic support in developing the organisations' capacities in successful project management and quality assurance, encompassing practical as well as conceptual aspects. A number of measures have been established to serve this purpose.

Activities, such as entry level training courses, study visits and partnership-building seminars support less experienced organisations and newcomers in the Programme. The aim is to enable organisations to handle basic project management, understand the main principles and objectives of the Programme and have international contacts. More experienced organisations benefit from thematic training courses, which aim at increasing their competences in

working with their target group, in particular in the international and intercultural setting. For the organisations which are well established in their local context, have prior experience in the Programme(s) and have a strong perspective in developing the youth work in the local, national or European level, SALTO SEE Resource Centre provides possibilities for networking in seminars, conferences or symposia organised internationally for topics relevant in the European youth work and youth policy.

Supporting the principles and implementation of non-formal education and learning in youth work

Notably, in the past decade, the emphasis in European youth policy has shifted towards highlighting the educational value of youth activities, and recognising youth work as a pedagogical approach to facilitate young people's non-formal learning. Historically, non-formal education in the Western Balkans remained fairly unknown and unrecognised. The impact study however shows the increase of understanding and applicability of different approaches and methodologies of non-formal education in youth work in the Western Balkans.

Raising the awareness of the principles of non-formal learning as well as transferring the competences in delivering non-formal education in youth work remains an important focus in the work of SALTO SEE Resource Centre. The centre also aims to provide a high quality non-formal education as a backbone of its own training strategy. Firstly, the training courses and educational tools are designed by experienced trainers and consultants. The learners' needs, interests and varying learning styles are in focus when setting the objectives and framework for the activities, a variety of innovative methods are used and the learning process is supported and assessed by appropriate tools, such as Youthpass. Beyond the youth work practise, SALTO SEE Resource Centre promotes the value and social recognition of non-formal education and learning in the Western Balkans

²² The impact study evaluation report is available at <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/seepublications/yaimpactsee/>

through national, regional and European level mechanisms²³.

Unravelling the essence of intercultural and European dimensions

One of the main findings of the impact study was the increase of European and intercultural awareness among beneficiaries and participants as a result of common projects. In the study one of the respondents described his / her view on the region as follows:

“A very special European dimension – a region which is in many ways so uniquely European and then again not at all”

The notion of Europe remains ambiguous in the context of cooperation with the Western Balkans. The definition of the region alternatively as a part of Europe, mirroring Europe or being in the process of becoming Europe, reflects the historically specific debates on both geographical and conceptual borders, through which Europe is continuously constituting its identity. As the Western Balkans is inevitably in the heart of such debates, the theme remains important, even more so as the socio-political tensions as well as cultural stereotyping in contemporary Europe heighten, as a consequence to economic uncertainty. SALTO SEE Resource Centre organises various training courses to contribute to the youth organisations' preparedness to explore the themes of European dimension, intercultural competences and their various implications, in a constructive manner.

Cooperating with local actors

A need to bring knowledge and resources closer to potential beneficiaries of the Programme(s)

²³ A highlight of this process was the *Symposium on Recognition of Youth Work and Non-formal Learning*, organised by SALTO SEE in cooperation with various other stakeholders (Tirana, Albania, 2012); report: <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/seepublications/tiranasymposium/>.

was addressed already in the early years. SALTO SEE Resource Centre nominated local Contact Points in the Western Balkan countries for the first time in 2005, and based on good practise, the network has existed ever since. Contact Points are local youth organisations, which have accumulated experience in the Programme(s) and have the capacities to transfer the knowledge further on to others. Their task is to promote the Programme, as well as to provide information, advice and training at the national level. With time, as the overall experience in the Programmes increased in the Western Balkans and the region got smaller due to Croatia (2011) and the FYRO Macedonia (2014) becoming Programme Countries, the number of Contact Points has been reduced from the original twelve to the current five.

Cooperation with the Contact Points has also been beneficial beyond its initial purpose. In addition to their advisory role, they function as intermediates, providing the SALTO SEE Resource Centre with information about the youth field in the region, and on the other hand, taking up an active role in advocating for the Programmes' objectives and priorities in the national youth work and youth policy scene.

SALTO SEE Resource Centre continues to support the Contact Points as well as trainers and other experts (e.g. EVS accreditors) from the Western Balkans, as one of the guiding principles in its work has been to facilitate capacity building of local experts. Training, resourcing and networking of actors based in the Western Balkans, instead of relying on foreign expertise, has enabled the sector to develop further and ensured a multiple impact.

The future: responding to the contemporary European challenges

The increased organisational capacity, heightened intercultural and European awareness and the further understanding and application of non-formal education and learning have led to a significant progress in the field of youth in the Western Balkan region. SALTO SEE Resource Centre together with its local multipliers has

taken up an important role in facilitating this development within the framework of the YOUTH, Youth in Action and Erasmus+ Youth in Action Programmes.

The decrease and redistribution of resources at the European level, together with the growing need to invest in youth, education and employment in the aging Europe, places high expectations as well as difficult challenges for the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Programme. Consequently, the EU integration process in the Western Balkans faces obstacles related to the European uncertainty, to which young people respond with changing their attitude to the EU accession to hesitant or even negative. Continuous efforts to promote European cooperation, non-formal learning and active citizenship are ever more important in

reference to the young generations facing the contemporary challenges as it was in the post-conflict context in the beginning of the millennium.

Along with the increasing complexity of the Programme's structure and political context in comparison to its predecessors, it is important for the SALTO SEE Resource Centre to continue its work in the region by renewing and developing appropriate educational concepts, approaches and methodology, as well as maintaining a platform for exchange with the Programme's key multipliers, potential beneficiaries and other stakeholder groups in the Western Balkans and beyond.

Majja Lehto

SALTO SOUTH EAST EUROPE
RESOURCE CENTRE