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Position paper on active Citizenship of young people

***"No-one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline"***

**UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in his address to the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, Lisbon 8 August 1998**

### Introduction

This paper produced by the Europe Region of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (Europe Region WAGGGS) and the European Scout Region addresses the question of active citizenship and the role of Guiding and Scouting in the creation of active citizens.

### Background

There is no one definition of citizenship but many possible and plausible meanings proposed by as many groups and individuals with different emphases, nuances and dimensions but common themes. It can be argued that the concept of active citizenship was first borne in the city-states of ancient Greece, when the status of "citizen" differentiated free men from slaves and guaranteed certain rights and responsibilities. These privileges and duties included participating in the government of the city-state where authority to govern came from those who had been designated "citizens". Citizenship therefore came to be seen as the state of being a member of a particular country and having rights because of it.<sup>1</sup> However, as it has developed over the years citizenship has become more than a formal relationship between an individual and the state. Citizenship has also come to mean the character of an individual viewed as a member of society, belonging to a community of shared values and mutual identity.<sup>2</sup> Individuals can belong to many different communities: - their school or workplace, non-governmental organizations, the town or city where they live, as well as the country in which they were born. They can be European citizens or even global citizens. There are also many levels of participation which active citizens can exercise. Individuals can be considered to be active citizens if they participate in the institutional channels that democracies offer (voting or standing for elections); participate in our daily life in a democratic way, be it at school, work, in their local neighbourhood, etc; or participate in civil society, by being involved in an organization, social movement or any other group.

### What makes an active citizen?

Taking inspiration from the teachings of Lord Baden-Powell, already 100 years ago, the concept of active citizenship is embedded in the educational method proposed by Guiding and Scouting to young people today. An active citizen is the ideal of a citizen who strives to build a better society with tools that are democratic and non-violent, respectful of the opinions of others. An active citizen

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Online Dictionary [www.dictionary.cambridge.org](http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org)

<sup>2</sup> Mind-bending on European citizenship 1 Howard Williamson Coyote 7 [www.training-youth.net](http://www.training-youth.net)  
Mind-bending on European citizenship 2 Abdallah Rouhli Coyote 7 [www.training-youth.net](http://www.training-youth.net)



is a committed individual, endowed with critical thought, who doesn't passively accept the institutions as they have developed over time and current laws but one who strives to challenge status quo using the principles of democracy and while taking account of the diverse range of opinions which exist in any society.

### The Challenge of Disengagement

What is true is that without active citizens, society as we know it would not exist. And "the active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local and regional level is essential if we want to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies."<sup>3</sup>

Youth participation leads to better decisions and better outcomes; is an integral part of a democratic society; strengthens young people's understanding of human rights and democracy; promotes social integration and cohesion in society; and encourages more people to participate, by example.<sup>4</sup>

However, it has become a frequent point of discussion among decision-makers at European and national level over the last few years that the numbers of young people involved in the traditional structures of society is declining. It has been argued that young people feel representative institutions are out-of-touch and not accessible to them, particularly individuals from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds, and that young people overall are less ready to participate in the traditional political and representative structures.<sup>5</sup>

Many reasons have been proposed as to why such a decline is taking place: the rapid pace of social; economic and political change has led to the breakdown of traditional communities; young people no longer have a sense of belonging to one distinct community but develop relationships which are more fluid and transitory; or that people have become more individualist and no longer have the time to spend on community activities.<sup>6</sup>

Other arguments focus on the apparent decline in the participation of young people in traditional political structures, as evidenced by the number of young people who vote in elections or participate in political parties. According to a recent Eurobarometer opinion poll, only 4% of young Europeans think that political parties are the most important structures to encourage the active participation of young people in society.<sup>7</sup> In addition, for many individuals, **voting** in elections is often not enough to make them feel that they are having an effect on government decision-making processes.

### The Role of Guiding and Scouting

To become an active citizen, it is necessary for young people to develop the following: a sense of belonging and ownership; a sense of responsibility, care and duty to their community and environment; a set of skills to enable them to become active agents for change and development; and the appropriate knowledge and attitudes so that they can make informed choices about the actions they are taking.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life"

Adopted by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe 10th Session 21 May 2003

<sup>4</sup> Children and Young People: Participating in decision-Making A call to Action p4 The Alliance of Youth Executive Officers

<sup>5</sup> A New Impetus for European Youth " European Commission White Paper COM (2001) 681 final

<sup>6</sup> Lifewide Learning for Active Citizenship European Youth Forum Position Paper April 2002 p3

<sup>7</sup> Lifelong learning for Active Citizenship European Youth Forum Position Paper April 2002 p4 quoting "Young Europeans in 2001: Results of a European opinion Poll p4

<sup>8</sup> Life-wide learning for Active Citizenship Youth Forum Position Paper April 2002 p2-3



The Europe Region of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scout (WAGGGS) and the European Region of the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM) represent national Guide and Scout Associations in forty eight European countries, and together they provide non-formal educational programmes for over two million young people throughout Europe. The non-formal educational programmes of both WAGGGS and WOSM are designed to fulfil our Missions that put the development of young people as active citizens at the heart of both Movements.<sup>9</sup> WAGGGS and WOSM believe that young people should be:

- **autonomous** - able to make choices and to control their personal and social life as an individual and as a member of society;
- **supportive** - able to show concern for others, to act with them and for them, and show their concern;
- **responsible** - able to take responsibility for their actions, keep commitments and complete whatever they undertake;
- **committed** - able to assert themselves in respect of values, a cause or an ideal, and to act accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

The methods of Guiding and Scouting develop young people to be active citizens in the following ways:

- **the system of progressive self-development** which encourages young people to exercise self-motivation and freedom of choice;
- **learning by doing**, which invite young people to take part in challenges or activities in a practical way, encouraging them to contribute to the best of their ability and make a positive contribution to ensure their success;
- **the patrol system**, an important early example of democracy in action, where young people learn to work with others as part of a team, and develop joint and individual responsibility;
- **service in the community** - which provides opportunities for Guides and Scouts to become involved in their local, national and global community and learn at first hand about the difference volunteering can make to the development of their society
- **active co-operation between young people and adults**, where younger members have the opportunity to work alongside adult leaders in a system of mutual fellowship

The international dimension of Guiding and Scouting provides young people with the opportunity to develop an appreciation of, and respect for, the diversity and similarity of peoples and cultures, preparing them to live and work in increasingly multi-cultural societies.

Young people who choose to participate in Scouting and Guiding accept that they have a duty to try and improve the world around them and the community in which they live. The Guiding and Scouting method of 'learning by doing' also means that Scouts and Guides become active and participatory individuals by accepting this role as agents of change.

The development of young people as active citizens and "agents for change" is not only implicit in the mission and educational methods of both organizations but also in the programmes designed to develop young people's confidence, decision-making capacities and life and leadership skills.

For example, WAGGGS' current triennial theme "Our Rights, Our Responsibilities" aims to raise awareness about basic human rights and help people to take active and positive responsibility for claiming those rights, not just for themselves but also for others. By participating in a wide range of

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<sup>9</sup> The mission of WAGGGS is "to enable girls and young women to develop their fullest potential as responsible citizens of the world." The mission of Scouting is "to contribute to the education of young people, through a value system based on the Scout Promise and Law, to help build a better world where people are self-fulfilled as individuals and play a constructive role in society."

<sup>10</sup> The Education of Young People A statement at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" produced by the Alliance of Youth Executive Officers.



activities, young people can be empowered to become active and effective citizens in their local and global community.

The UN Millennium Declaration identifies three main challenges for the future of the world:

- Peace, security and disarmament;
- Development and poverty eradication;
- Protecting our common environment.

As part of its commitment to meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) the Scouts of the World Programme has been developed. The programme is designed for 15 to 26 year old Scouts (Senior-Scouts and Rover sections) or non-Scouts, willing to contribute to make the world a better place by engaging them in local projects which seek to alleviate the challenges identified in the Millennium declaration.

The Europe Region WAGGGS and the European Scout Region are working on a number of initiatives to ensure that young people are equipped to respond to needs of their communities and are empowered to be active within them.

### Actions and Recommendations

There are a number of actions that are being taken by policy-makers to encourage young people to become active citizens. Within the European Union, active citizenship education has been identified as one of the common goals of European educational objectives to be achieved by 2010; active citizenship for young people was one of the key messages to emerge from the White Paper on Youth produced by the European Commission, and participation of young people is one of the Common Objectives for EU member states as a result of the White Paper process.

The Council of Europe has designated 2005 the European Year of Citizenship through Education. In consultation with young people, it has produced the Revised European Charter of the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, which outlines the political and administrative actions which it is felt are needed to be implemented at a local level to encourage the development of active citizenship amongst young people and the social and cultural conditions which if created could empower young people to become involved in their communities.

The Europe Region WAGGGS and the European Scout Region welcomes the consideration given to the question of youth participation and the development of young people as active citizens at these levels.

We call for greater recognition of the role of participatory youth organizations such as Guiding and Scouting, which encourage the on-going involvement of young people in decisions and actions affecting them, and enable young people to learn the skills and values necessary to become active citizens, and the role of our non-formal education programmes in providing practical opportunities to put these skills into action.

We welcome measures that encourage and empower young people to actively participate in public life and democratic processes and which support the equal participation of young men and young women in all levels of public life.

We call for the right social, cultural educational and economic conditions to be created so that young people can participate in society - and for measures to be developed which enable young people from marginalised and disadvantaged communities to participate equally with their peers.

Both organisations hope that the public bodies and institutions working at all levels of decision-making will develop real partnerships with youth organisations, (including Guide and Scout Associations) to encourage the participation of young people, recognising their particular needs.

