

SUPPORTING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN GEORGIA

When their goals and objectives are aligned, partnership between civil society organisations and authorities can be a good example of shared responsibility. With EU support and in cooperation with regional authorities, the “*Regional Association of Youth Initiatives (AIRA)*” is finalising a draft regional strategy on youth policy for the Kvemo Kartli region in southeastern Georgia. This is the first time that regional and local authorities are meeting civil society organisations to discuss and develop a joint regional strategy in this field.

In 2014, the Georgian Government approved the “National Youth Policy Document” establishing the vision and principles for a localised regional strategy addressing youth issues with the specific needs and interests of the region’s young people in mind.

Challenges for youth to stay

While some youth issues in the Kvemo Kartli region are common, others are

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more distinct. As the third largest city in Georgia and the administrative centre of Kvemo Kartli, Rustavi is only 20 minutes from the capital Tbilisi. Its young people are thus able to easily spend their day in Tbilisi, in contrast to their counterparts from more remote regions in Georgia.

“If you are prepared and lucky enough to become a student, then some years of joyful life in Tbilisi await you. Otherwise, empty days, months and years are yours to get lost in a bunch of challenges that can easily become problems” says Gega Lotishvili, 21 and Giorgi Kopadze, 20, students from Rustavi, who are actively involved in NGO work that shares their understanding of youth issues.

Life in Rustavi for young people is far from interesting with no entertainment such as cinema or theatre and limited youth-related NGO activities. Gega and Giorgi explain that the rest of the

region, which has a mixed population of Azeris, Georgians, Armenians, Greeks, and Russians, poses many obstacles for young people to get engaged in activities of the civil society.

Gega and Giorgi claim that young people from the villages are leaving the country. “Cooking classes, are among the few other opportunities available in Rustavi, while outside the



city, young people cannot even afford to visit the regional center. Most go on to study in Tbilisi and very few come back– what can an educated person do in a village without a job?” they ask

Youth is the source of progress

Some youth organisations in Rustavi are very active. Their understanding of youth issues has allowed them to take initiatives directly to the authorities.

“At the beginning of this year we initiated a working meeting between 27 youth organisations in the region and the governor and municipality of Rustavi, supported by the project “Civil Society. Dialogue for Progress”, says Rati Cheishvili, project manager for the Regional Association of Youth Initiatives. The discussions led the participants to sign a memorandum of cooperation.

“The aim was to develop a local youth policy promoting young people’s participation in local and regional life and in the decision-making process”.

Another workshop led by the Warsaw-based “Foundation for Economic Education” brought together the governor, NGO representatives, some international organisations, regional media and all local municipalities and city councils of the region with the aim of creating a draft regional strategy. “The draft was developed in June. We are planning to hold meetings with young people from all municipalities to get their ideas and recommendations”, explains Rati, informing that another round of discussions with NGOs and local authorities will take place at a later date.

Addressing youth issues through partnership

“We decided to work together as the challenges faced by regional, local authorities and civil society organisations are identical. Furthermore, the current law on youth has formalised

relations so that regional authorities could be involved in youth activities as partners. Not everything is perfect but our goal is the same and here is how we can work together”, says Paata Khizanashvili, the Governor of the Kvemo Kartli region.

The region is multinational and the problems vary from one part to another. *“Youth faces different problems, from unemployment and non-involvement in decision-making processes to a lack of engagement in arts and sport activities etc.”* she adds. We are now working on a universal document that would be localised as part of an individualised approach for the Action Plan.

Rati Cheishvili explains that the draft strategy will cover several issue areas including youth participation, special support, healthy lifestyle, legal issues, education, employment and social-economic conditions. “In its final



stage, the draft regional strategy will be submitted to the governor for approval, which will make its implementation binding for local authorities of the region”.

“We have the opportunity to take part in decision-making process regarding our future”, says Rati, adding that they are looking forward to realising their ideas. “Six out of 27 participating NGOs have created a fundraising coalition. We will decide where to go and help those ideas come true”.



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