

# "How to motivate young citizens to participate in society: Which organizational forms work?"

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## **1. Introduction – The Realm of Youth Participation**

„The youth owns the future“ is a prominent saying in Germany. But do young people claim it for themselves? And does the society provide a voice for them ? Is the generation that brought about the “New social movements” succumbed by a generation that regards fitness studios, internet chat rooms and the love parade as the highest form of political participation? These are some of questions this text is going to explore. After that, we will find out how youth organizations can make themselves attractive in the eye of their potential members, the young people. But to understand which organizational forms fit for the young generation, we must first understand, what this generation is like.

## **2. Megatrends – External factors influencing the Generation Post-68**

Before using the term “Generations”, we must define it. Regardless of other usages of the word, we should meticulously distinguish between its chronological and its sociological definition. According to the chronological definition, everybody until the age of 30 belongs to the young generation, everybody between 30 and 60 is considered to be medium-age and everybody over 60 is old. This definition of “generation” is for instance used to statistically measure how the ratio of old-vs-young people changes over time, e.g. until the year 2030.

If we talk about the “Young Generation” in this respect, we can say e.g. that their number will decrease significantly in some countries of the western world. Until the year 2030, the number of young people under 30 will have been halved and the number of people over 60 will have doubled relatively to the total population.

The more important definition of “generation” in our context is the sociological one. Leopold Rosenmayr once defined the term “generation” as a “social entity which is formed through the same external living conditions which are applied upon them.” If this is true, megatrends will have a serious influence on the characteristics of the young generation. They are first subject to these trends and conditioned by them before they themselves shape and set the trends in society, albeit this being a two-way process.

Before we start to investigate some of these megatrends, I would like to point out that there is as yet no sociological generation worldwide. Those generations, identified as social entities with a common set of values and beliefs, exist only within the context of nations, maybe hemispheres (industrialized countries vs. developing countries) but certainly not worldwide. In a debate at the Global Dialogue No. 10 at the EXPO World Exhibition in Hanover, Germany, between youth leaders and politicians from the North and the South, the South blamed the North for not giving enough development aid, as do politicians from the South. The generational conflict was strongly overlaid by the North-South-conflict. As yet there is no collective consciousness of young people worldwide which would be stronger than their collective consciousness of living in the developing or developed countries of the world. When I speak about a series of generations here, I refer to the situation in Germany which can be, to some extent, generalized with regard to the industrialized world, but not to the developing countries.

The following key trends have had an impact on the youth in Germany:

- **The end of the struggle between socialism and capitalism in 1989:** The collapse of socialist ideology led to a wariness to believe in ideologies at all. Superficial, well-sounding visions and utopias have lost their credibility and innocence. Hence, it seems that the youth has become more realistic and less naïve. They are either abstaining from or adhering only to more modest, more realistic visions without exaggeration. This is an enormous change since youth movements in Germany since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had always been characterized by exaggerated views, be it the “Wandervogel” of the 1920s, the Hitler-Jugend or the Generation 68. In that respect, only the post WWII “skeptical generation” (1950-1967). was comparable to today’s youth. However, those who are politically active try new thoughts. They can be described by such catch-phrases as “Generation 89” or (in Germany) “Generation Berlin”.
- **Growing complexity:** In systems theory, complexity is defined as the number of elements that exist, the number of elements with which each element interacts and the intensity of their interactions. Especially through globalization, the number of interactions has grown enormously. Increasingly, politicians refer to forces of circumstances as a justification for their actions. The loss of the primacy of politics has become a fact. What does that mean for opportunities for political participation of young people? It means that only the brightest and best take up the challenge to get involved in politics. Those who are able to cope with today’s complexities and are able to give differentiated views. The rest retreats according to the motto: “Everything has become so complicated. I do not understand enough to judge who is right with his/her arguments.” However, uneasiness with politics in general persists.
- **Change in requirements in the labor market:** Mobility, adaptability, life-long-learning, mental flexibility and a portfolio of versatile skills – these are the requirements to become a career achiever nowadays. The youth – at least a part of it – fulfills these requirements, even to a larger extent than many older people. They

have become flexible (global) nomads with an extremely open mind and a will to transcend old patterns of work. They do not long for the old security their parents and grandparents once had or envisioned, instead, they look for opportunities for self-employment and start-ups. Others do not go so far, but they too have accepted that they might be employed for a while, then self-employed, then “unemployed”, then students again and so on... These patch-work careers are typical of my generation. The home is not a castle anymore but just a pit stop, an office has been replaced by a laptop with internet connection.

- **“Multi Option Society” instead of mapped out lives:** In former times, one did not “choose” a life. One “got” a life and lived it. As Ulrich Beck pointed out, it is typical of modern times that it is much easier now to invent and direct one’s own life. One can be a shareholder or speculator who in his/her free time volunteers as a catholic boy/girl scout camp leader; you can become a dot.com-millionaire who still lives at “Hotel Mom”. Combining differences has become the major characteristic of my generation, the youth. That is why the term that best describes us is “Generation AND” (instead of Generation X or Generation Golf). “Generation AND” is in this respect the opposite of its predecessor generation – Generation 68 – which was an “OR”-Generation. We, the youth, are told: How can you be for profitability AND charity, for lower taxes AND more social welfare, for left AND right – you must DECIDE.” “Yes, we decide”, we might answer, “ but never fundamentally, always gradually keeping in mind different perspectives. The world is not white or black any longer but dark gray with a lot of bright gray spots. A decision for a particular party which might have been right at the last election might be wrong today.”
- **Internet and Computer Use:** Generation @ (Horst Opaschowski) or NetKids (Don Tapscott) are pseudonyms of a generation which grows up with the computers. Apart from the fact that this turns the authority and wisdom cone upside down, what does that mean for youth organizations? It means that they have new, unprecedented opportunities for political communication. They are the *conditio sine qua no* for loose networks of politically interested people or special interest groups. But they offer even more for established movements. As long as their members are educated enough to be computer-wise and speak English, the internet enables virtual debates (not only chats, but real discussions), virtual working on common papers, virtual project teams , virtual elections. The boards of many organizations vote by E-Mail nowadays. Not only have all magazines, but also all parties gone on-line. For instance, the German liberal party FDP allows virtual input to their new programmatic outline. Unlike one-way-television, the two-way internet invites critical citizens to raise their voices whenever they want to. However, the majority of “users” have not become “netizens” yet. It is the “weirdos” and lonesome which are the most active participants in many chatrooms and virtual platforms for serious political debates. Nevertheless, the internet has pervaded every corner of the realm of politics. Emails have largely replaced letters within political activism. For example, the Serb youth movement Otpur used it as well as the students on strike in Germany 1997 or the grass root movement against globalization (which ironically is worldwide and hence an child of globalization).

### **3. Exit, Constructive Participation and Destructive Voices**

To live up to all the new external living conditions exceeds the capabilities of many young people. Hence, there are extremely successful young people who can cope with all those

changes better than the average grown-up: They have embraced these external trends. Their behavior can be described (in reference to the classification of Albert O. Hirschman shows in his legendary book "Exit, Voice and Loyalty") as "constructive participation". Others cannot cope with them. They show basically two patterns of behavior: exit or "destructive voices"

#### - EXIT

For many young people, "political" engagement is unattractive. Political parties hold the last post on the credibility ranking (23,4% in the Shell Study of 1997, also see World Values Survey), polls have been decreasing for the last years. "Our generation neither understands what SDI was nor why the European Union had to compost millions of tomatoes a year", Florian Illies wrote (Generation Golf). Maybe that is why they are more interested in the latest Nasdaq-stoke or the fanciest bistro in town than in a pro and con-debate about the retirement system. But faced with such enormous complexity it is also a feeling of helplessness. "The world is just too complicated for us to be against or in favor of something", Illies writes almost pityingly. Is it right to fight against Shell because they want to sink Brent Spar? Or is the method of wrecking the oil platform at shore, like Greenpeace proposed, maybe even worse for the environment? Should we back women rights movements? But isn't that a little one-sided, knowing that women live five years longer to live than men? 30 years ago, everything seems clearer. The average political German student believed in the good in humankind in general and in the evil of the Americans in special. Wasn't the world simple these days?

#### - Destructive VOICE

Others might raise their voices – and participate in neo-nazi, xenophobic or ultra-nationalist organizations. This had become a problem especially in Eastern Germany since German reunification. We still have two Germanies if we talk about youth here. In Eastern Germany, the picture is as dark as Mr. Edelstein paints it in his article. In Western Germany, however, the percentage of young people with pandering to the far right is not stronger than in France or the UK and right-wing parties reach even by far lower election results as in comparable countries.

#### Figure 1

Today, the majority of young people is skeptical and refrains from active political involvement. Although a significant percentage is involved in project work in youth organizations with a statute like AIESEC, AEGEE, YOIS, FRFG, Rotaract, Elsa, Young European Federalists or YOIS, in church Organizations, environmental organizations, amnesty international, Union Youth Orgas, partisan-political youth organizations and university groups), as well as **Networks** (scholarship networks, young think-tanks, university initiatives like Public (ebs), speakers society (LSE), and in **spontaneous initiatives** like peaceful candle light sit-ins, protest demonstrations or projects to clean up the environment.

In my opinion, the Love Parade cannot be called a "political" movement even if we define the term "political" in a broad sense. Why is the so-called "Slight Involvement" group then still a little bit in between? Well, at least the organizers state that they fight against the grouchiness and "fun hostility" of generation 68.

Generally speaking, the youth has – almost by definition – always been more radical in a positive as well as in a negative sense. Young people do not automatically accept traditional structures, they naturally question them. Socrates once said: "It is the young men who shatter the states." In Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic was blown away by a movement called Otpur (Resistance), consisting of faithful and creative 5000-6000 young people. In Palestine,

Northern Ireland, the Basque country and Liberia however, it is the young generation that throws the bombs, assassinates, kills and rapes. The “coming of age” has always been a period of growth and maturing, of uncertainty, of sexual hardship. It is almost strange that the youth of today in Germany is so rational in its behavior.

#### **4. Generation 68 and Generation 89**

That had not always been the case. If we look at figure 2

##### **figure 2**

we see that the total percentage of participating young people (constructive participation and destructive voices) was higher in the 1970s than today. People were less skeptical and more enthusiastic about political involvement. There were less right-wing extremists and more left wing activists. The Fun Generation which used *Slight Involvement* as a special form of manifestation did not yet exist. At this time, political participation was seen as serious business.

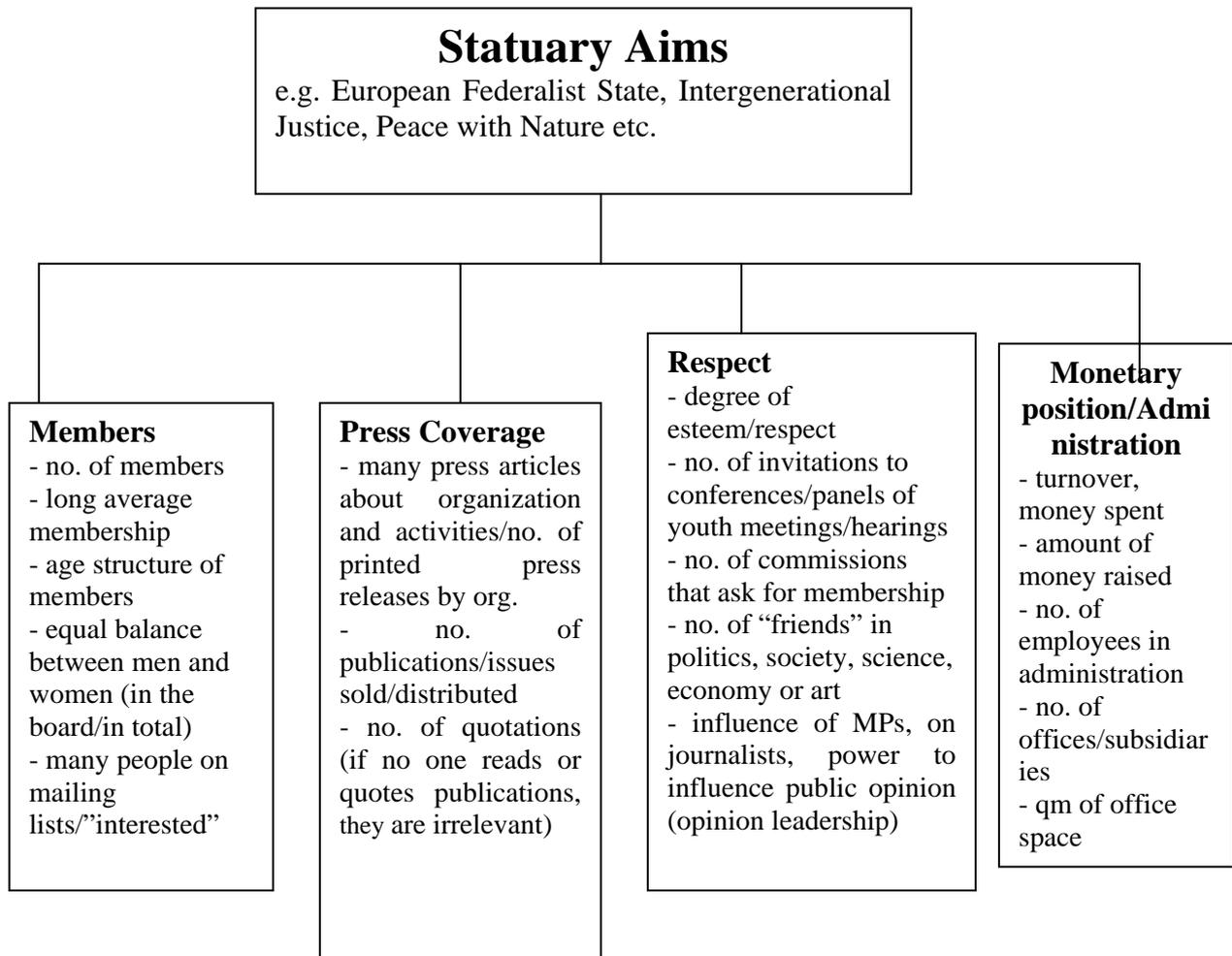
In the 1968-period, the circle of politically interested or politically involved people was larger, but not necessarily better: As said before, people in Europe believed in the good of humankind in general and in the evil of the U.S.in particular. They knew what they were against: Vietnam, repressive education, the old sexual morality, the elite university system, capitalism, patriarchy. But on the other hand, new approaches like anti-authoritarian education were not questioned either. In other words: Their initiatives were seldom characterized by critical evaluation but by unreflected judgement. One might see it as an improvement that those forms of political involvement have diminished.

In the former German Democratic Republic, political involvement had a somewhat different flavor. Particularly youth movements like the Young Pioneers or the Free German Youth were heavy tinted with socialist ideology as they were spin-offs of the ruling regime. Engagement was often not entirely voluntary although it should also be mentioned that these organizations provided meaningful and fun activities for its members apart from propaganda. The political opposition found its voice through church organizations which were suppressed by the state, however. This somewhat different experience of political involvement in youth organizations may be a reason why young East Germans are not particularly attracted to partisan-political youth organizations.

#### **5. Success Measurement of Youth Organizations**

I would like to concentrate for a while on official youth organizations with statutes and a relatively firm structure. Examples are AIESEC, AEGEE, YOIS, FRFG, Rotaract, Elsa, church organisations, environmental organizations, Union Youth organizations, partisan-political youth movements or university groups.

In economics, the success of a company is measured by its profit. But how do you measure the success of a non-profit organization? A non-profit organization is considered successful if it achieves its aims as stated in its statute. For example, Young European Federalists aim at a European state, Amnesty International wants to relieve the burden of political prisoners, Greenpeace strives for peace with nature (and among humans), the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations works towards a shift in consciousness to achieve intergenerational justice and sustainability. For all these organizations, their success is measured by the achievement or at least approach of their particular goals which is defined in the statutes.

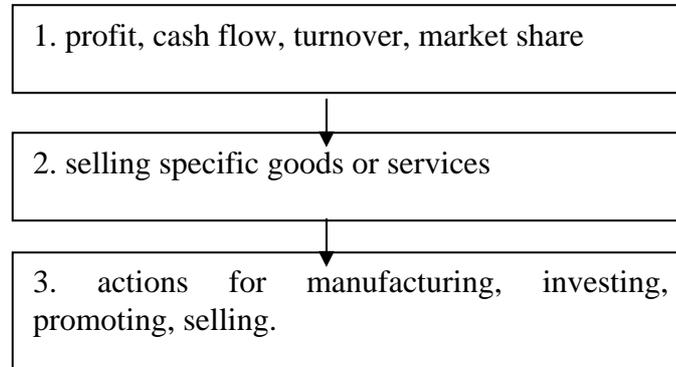


Seen from this perspective, activities are only means to achieve primary and secondary aims. Such activities include:

- Activities/Means**

  - organizing meetings and congresses
  - engaging in "actions" or projects
  - organizing manifestations
  - publishing publications (books, articles)
  - releasing press releases
  - spreading the word through mouth-to-mouth-propaganda
  - writing open letters to politicians
  - collecting signatures
  - organizing press conferences
  - engaging in lawsuits
  - doing spectacular actions to make headlines ,
  - raising money

To complete the picture, it is helpful to illustrate major difference between profit-oriented companies and non-profit organizations. In this model, the first and the second level are turned around. In many cases, monetary goals are on the top level of final goals, at least in large, shareholder-value driven companies.



## 6. Some assumptions about the „success“ of youth organizations

A quantitative evaluation of the success of youth organizations requires much more time. However, we can make some assumptions. If we define “domain” as the potential members of an organization (e.g. catholic youth for the BDKJ), we find a relatively weak density (actual members/potential members) in all youth organizations. This is not surprising in an individualistic society. More important however is the question of how far people outside the domain pay attention to the particular organisation.

Generally speaking, it seems easier to mobilize people knowing what one wants to **abolish** then to **create** or **establish** something. The fight against Milosovic was so successful because the opposition knew what it did not want: him. “Gotov je” – (He is finished) was the battle cry, not “New elections!”, “Real democracy!” or the name of the candidate of the opposition “Kostunica”.

Activists against globalization, the IMF and the Worldbank have a similar recipe. In addition, they are very sophisticated in making headlines by using simple methods like “chaining together”, “creative masquerade”, “sit-ins”, “sleep-ins”, hunger strikes, burning of puppets, throwing cakes and the obligatory fighting with the police.

Probably every youth organization could use such methods to receive press attention, but not all want to..

Sometimes, a small, very active elite can become the opinion leader on a particular topic as was the case with the German *Kommune 1* (Uschi Obermeyer, Rainer Langhans) in the 1968-rebellion. According to the Financial Times, at present, the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (FRFG), a group of 300 young people, has become the leading voice of young people in the retirement system debate. The voices of the partisan youth organizations were not registered by the media, whereas the FRFG has received more then 50 invitations to talk shows about this topic in the last four years. More than 600 press articles quoted their press releases and statements. They were invited by the minister for social security twice (by the opposition leader once) to debate the issue of an intergenerational just retirement systems. This surprising success became possible because the retirement system debate is a generational conflict between young and old. Thus, the media asked for a genuine voice from the younger generation. The partisan-political youth organizations could not play that role

because in Germany they are associated with the left-right-conflict, not with the young-old conflict.

## **7. The “Market” of Youth Organizations**

In a way, youth organizations form a market. Each of them has its particular niche. They are hardly competitors, mainly because the “customer” (the potential or actual member) does not see them as substitutes). Why is that? Firstly, personal contacts with other members of the organization are not transferable. In case of dropping out of the organization, new contacts need to be established which would be time-consuming and tiresome. Secondly, they differ in their statutory aims, their thematic range, their “cultures”, their working methods and resources.

To get a better overview about youth organizations, we will show the market for youth organizations in diagrams.

Professionalism

Figure 3:

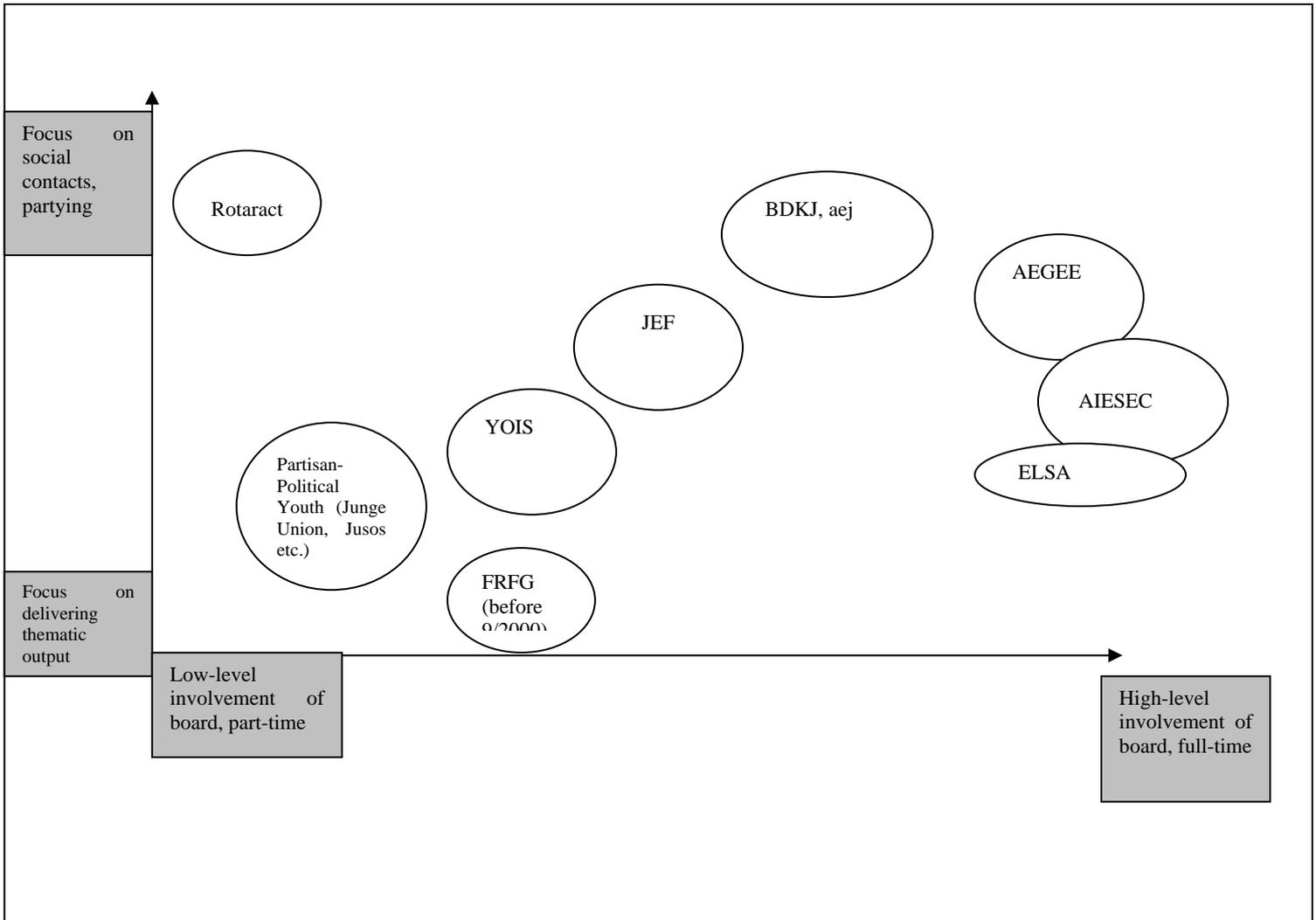
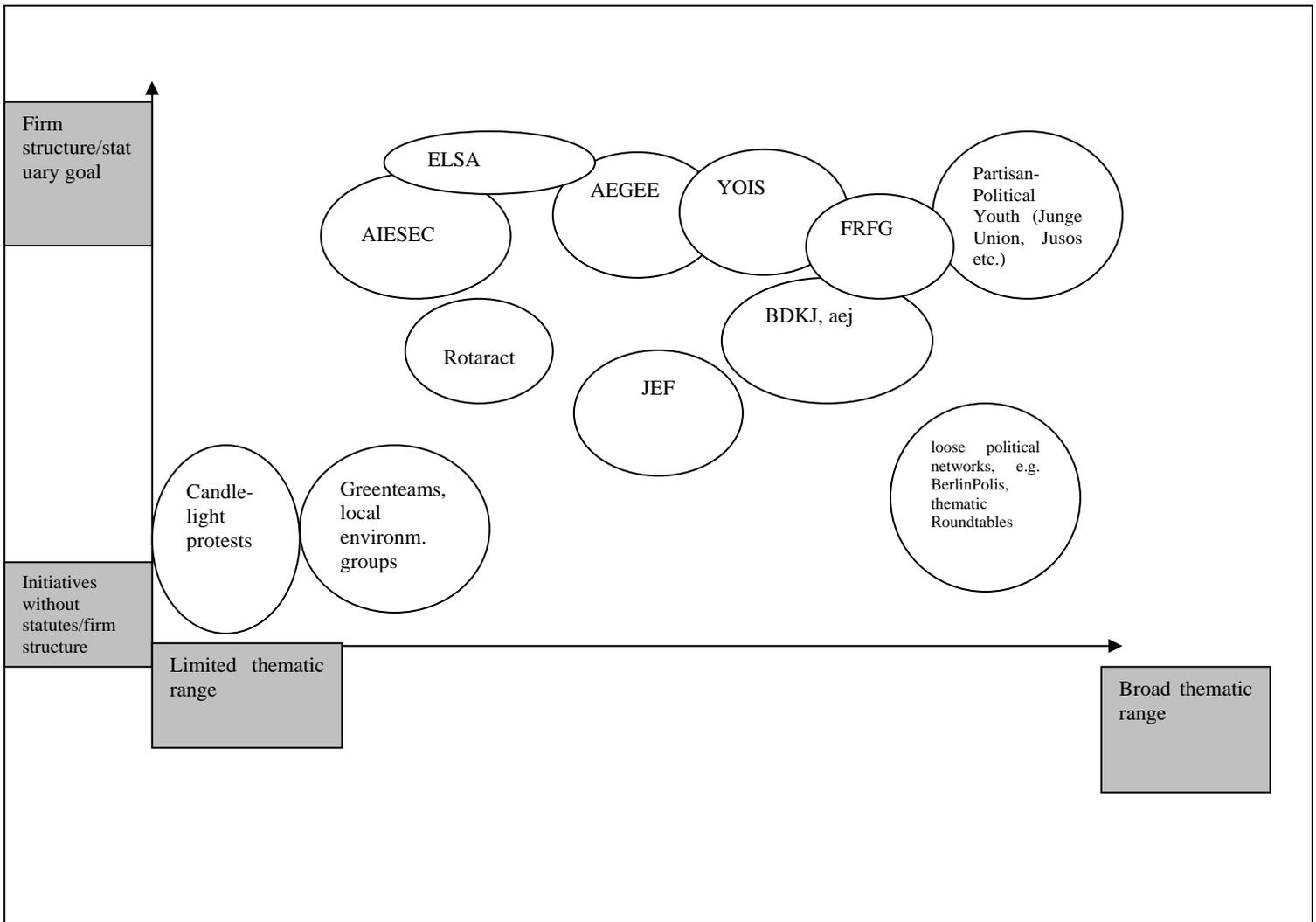


Figure 4:



Other axis denominations could be:

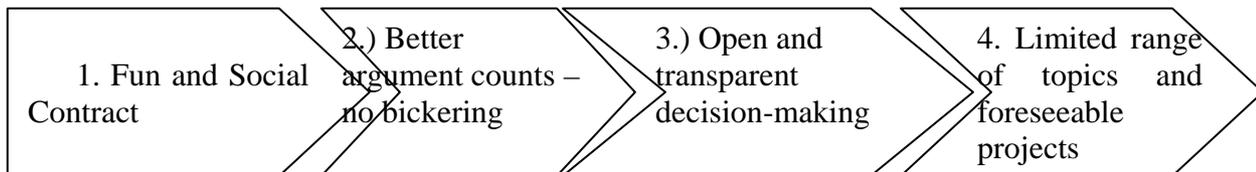
- no. of members
- no. of turnover
- no. of press articles

## 8. Making organizational structures attractive

If young people get involved in organized youth organizations, they invest time and often money, too. They will only get involved, however, if what they get out of their commitment exceeds the cost. What can they expect to get in return for their commitment?

- a more meaningful life
- good consciousness
- new ideas, a broader perspective on life
- social contacts, either friendships or potential career contacts
- fun
- more knowledge and skills

Of course, youth organizations from their perspective cannot guarantee that young people get these things in return for their participation. But, as the Shell Study of 1997 showed, they can provide “cultures” of organizations that are attractive to young people. However, to be attractive for young people four principles must be guaranteed:



1.) Commitment must be fun! Fun is a word with many definitions. The youth of today can have fun while politically active or have fun without political commitment but never the later without fun. There must be the right balance between work and fun. Outdoor activities, parties and rituals are almost indispensable. For example, team-building activities at AIESEC are almost as sophisticated as in the management departments of major companies.

Whereas in the partisan-political youth organizations activism is seen by at least a few as a starting-point for their party career, involvement in other youth organizations is not. However, by participating voluntarily, people want non-material rewards like press attention, opportunities for personal development or learning experiences. In order to motivate their members, youth organizations should not deliver their resolutions to second level politicians, but always address the highest politicians.

2.) - Rational and logical arguments count – no bickering and “politics”

Young people detest the mechanisms of party politics. In a democracy (the least bad of all systems), the ruling party cannot simply say that the opposition has the better ideas. Likewise, the opposition can never concede that the ruling party is doing a good job in some fields. Parties which were against wars before they came to power may be in favor of war afterwards and vice versa. In political parties, the mechanisms of achieving and securing power play a dominant role. But it is this pattern of behavior that leads young people to think that politics is a dirty, unattractive business. “New youth organizations” are not subject to such conditions. Young people long for a culture where the better argument counts and where people wants t learn through exchanges in a meaningful, thematic discussion, instead of trying to “win” the argument at all costs.

Political participation cannot be measured by polls alone. Actually, an abstention of vote can be interpreted sometimes as an even more political action than voting. Think of the boycott of the last election in Serbia! Also in western countries, abstention can be a protest against the decline of political culture in general. If candidates use more and more dirty tactics, like insulting the opponent instead of executing a fair exchange of arguments. If “mirror opposition” becomes more and more prominent, young people will turn away from politics. However, if we understand politics as an ‘activity that is to move something in society’, then a lot of young people are politically engaged. Yet, these organizations are not partisan ones.

3.) “New youth organizations” should try to make decisions in an open and transparent way, rejecting fiddling, closed circles and opaqueness. Outsiders must be able to easily become insiders. In “new youth organizations”, a new member should not be required to adopt existing positions just because they have always been there. Doubting and questioning should be a prime duty of the organization’s members. Constant reflections about the status quo should be in the best interest of an organization. They should make itself the sternest critics of their position papers and ask their members to try all kinds of contrary arguments on them, thus, making papers better and better.

4.) An endless range of topics might be unattractive. On the one hand, young people feel overwhelmed by the sheer uncountable number of problems they are faced with in today’s world as for example presented through the media. On the other hand and maybe as a means of selection, young people are only interested in topics that concern them personally with. They should have a chance to decide themselves which topics they are interested in or not. Interestingly, many “new youth organizations” are just single-issue movements. People are also motivated by the success of projects with realistic horizons. They want to see and harvest the results of their work. “A lot gets lost in broad, general approaches. I prefer to know exactly what I am working for.” said a young woman from Berlin in an interview for the German magazine (*Der Spiegel* (40/2000, S.39)). Hence, youth organizations should plan feasible projects and celebrate their successes.

Other studies name “low barriers of exit” as a further criteria for attractiveness. The reason may be that low barriers of exit might entice potential entrants to come in as people may leave the organization at anytime without cost.

In conclusion, traditional youth institutions, such as the youth movements of political parties or the youth organizations of trade unions, generally fail to fulfill the above mentioned criteria. Initiatives and new youth organizations with the focus on environment, human rights or racial discrimination and the like offer more suitable “cultures” for young people to become politically active.

## Conclusion

I would like to highlight a point which has been subject to discussion in this conference different time: When should grown-ups “do for”, when should they “do with” and when should they just “letting them do”? They should “do for” for the deprived, marginalized youth. They should let the more educated ones find their own ways without hindering them and they should “do with” the others in between. Not all youth organizations literally have to be led by young people. An organization in order to help unemployed youth to find a job can be led by adults. An organization who is formulating political demands of the young generation to society, however, cannot be led by an 50-year-old without a credibility problem.

Generally, one should try to give youth responsibility whenever possible. Until recently, youth was seen more as a problem than a resource. Youth was seen as state of deficiency. Although there is reason to have concern about some young people, that youth-deficit approach misses the point: It makes more noise if one tree falls than if a forest grows.” The majority of youth is an indispensable resource for society and should be regarded as such. Society cannot afford to ignore their visions, their idealism, their energy and their enthusiasm any longer. The future is often promised to the youth, now the adults must start acting like the present is their`s, too.

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