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POSITION PAPER

**on the challenges and needs of young people
living in the rural areas of Bulgaria**

**prepared by the participants in project
“The Voice of Youth – The Voice of Change!”**

**20 –27 August 2013
Varna, Bulgaria**

**This project is implemented with the financial support of the European Youth Foundation,
Council of Europe.**

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Context

In the last twenty years Bulgaria has been struggling to transform from a centrally-planned country where ideas and opinions were imposed to people into a democratic country with citizens understanding their rights but also responsibilities towards the whole community. However, especially with the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, the process of building a strong democratic society and a country developed on economic, political and social terms has been slowed or even stopped. The political environment in Bulgaria reached crisis levels in the beginning of 2013. Youth unemployment in Bulgaria has been reaching record levels and continues to increase. Illiteracy among youngsters is booming, aggression between students has become a normal daily occurrence. The opinion of young people lacks recognition and respect by adults, resulting in intergenerational problems. All the young people in Bulgaria have been facing such challenges. However, the young people living in the rural areas have been bearing burden even larger at its scope considering that the rural areas have not only been suffering from the previously stated problems, but also from further complexities in terms of lack of infrastructure and access to basic services.

Considering all this, we, the participants in the project **“The Voice of Youth – The Voice of Change!”** and members of the Youth Movement for Development of the Rural Areas in Bulgaria (YMDRAB) believe that young people can have a more active role in the process of development of our society and can contribute to overcoming the major problems that the Bulgarian citizens face.

This Position Paper underlines the main problems that young people from the Bulgarian rural areas face. These problems have been clustered in three fields, namely:

- 1) Democracy and Youth Participation**
- 2) Social Inclusion of young people**
- 3) Youth in diverse societies**

Furthermore, this document includes the official position of the participants on the changes that need to be seen so as to ensure fair opportunities for personal and professional development of young people living in the rural areas. The document ends with a description on the role of young people, youth organizations and institutions in the process of sustainable rural development and change.

This Position Paper is addressed to all people to reflect, act and support the creation of a youth-friendly environment for the personal and professional development of young people living in the rural areas.

I. Democracy and youth participation

Problems identified:

- ❖ **Lack of comprehensive youth policies:** This phenomena is especially recognized on local level, where youth policies do not clearly correspond to the needs of young people;
- ❖ **Information problems:** The quality and actual information about policies, initiatives and projects planned or undertaken by authorities on local, regional and national level do not effectively reach young people creating an information gap;
- ❖ **Few opportunities for participation in the governance:** Young people from the rural areas experience lack of opportunities to raise their voice and express their vision on the governance of their communities. They do not have the chance to directly take part in the decision making process together with the authorities governing their local communities;
- ❖ **Existence of intergenerational problems:** Young people experience major problems in communication and interaction with adults. Their opinions are recognized as inferior and lacking expertise and knowledge. Young people are seen as incompetent and inexperienced to be able to positively contribute to any discussions, debates or policy proposals;
- ❖ **Motivational challenges:** Considering the current situation young people do not recognize the importance in their active participation in the society believing that they are not able to change anything and they will only waste their time, energy and resources;
- ❖ **Lack of youth structures:** Rural areas do not offer any structures, where young people can share their views and develop themselves. There is a lack of youth clubs, youth organizations as well as places where young people can meet in a creative environment.

Our Demands:

- **Political Participation:** Creation of more possibilities for the rural young people to express their vision on the development of their local communities;
- **Effective youth policies:** Creation and revision of youth policies that effectively tackle the challenges that young people face in rural areas and that allow them for personal and professional development;
- **Intergenerational dialogue:** Rural young people should be respected for their opinion and vision. Their competences and experience should be valued and accepted by the society and policy-makers;
- **Motivation for participation:** Young people should be motivated and inspired to be active citizens and effective contributors to the development of their societies;
- **Promotion of youth organisations and volunteering:** Volunteering should be promoted as a way of building community responsibility. In addition to this, youth organisations should be supported as well as their work as a main source of providing volunteering activities, spaces for exchange and development of rural young people;

- **New media**: The media should be used as a channel for spreading information, for informing citizens and in particular young people on the opportunities that the local authorities provide for their development. The media should recognize and make the work of youth organizations visible;
- **Youth Centers**: Young people should be provided with a space where to share and exchange, therefore Youth Centers could be seen as youth-friendly environment providing possibilities for such needs.

II. Social Inclusions of young people

Problems identified:

- ❖ **Youth unemployment**: Rural young people do not have enough employment opportunities putting them in disadvantaged situation;
- ❖ **Transition between education and work**: The period of transition between education and work is a difficult part of the life of young people. The lack of support creates further complexities for youth;
- ❖ **Social securities and access to healthcare**: In the conditions of high unemployment and lack of support in the transition period between education and work young people are left behind by the social security system and they have no access to healthcare;
- ❖ **Bad education**: In the rural areas there is lack of quality primary and secondary education. Furthermore, the access to higher education is limited as well as its quality;
- ❖ **Transportation problems**: People living in the rural areas experience difficulties in terms of mobility created due to the few transportation options as well as the poor quality of the transport infrastructure and the transportation services;
- ❖ **Cultural and social life**: In the rural areas young people do not have access to cultural events as well as to entertainment facilities creating a reflection on their social life;
- ❖ **Opportunities for development of talents**: Rural areas do not provide enough opportunities for developing the talents of young people in a modern, effective and enriching manner as well as to practice their hobbies;
- ❖ **Pollution and environmental protection**: Environment has a central role in the rural areas and the life of their citizens. However, the pollution affects the life of young people and their possibility to enjoy the beauty of the nature;

Our demands:

- **Employment**: Boosting the economy, creation of more employment and eradication of the discrimination on gender and age bases;
- **Social enterprises**: Promotion of social enterprises as a way of creating more youth employment and better quality of the work places in the rural areas;

- **Quality internships**: Ensuring the provision of quality internships by the private and the public sector as a way of supporting the transition between education and employment of young people;
- **Effective education**: Provision of quality education at all levels, which takes into account the individual characters of students and allows them for effective learning and development. Education that builds strong citizens and open-minded people respecting the human rights of all the individuals;
- **Inclusive social security and healthcare systems**: Rural young people have the possibility to access social security and healthcare as a measure to overcome their vulnerability;
- **Cultural and social life**: Cultural events are offered in the rural areas in regular bases. Furthermore opportunities for entertainment and spaces should be created where young people can meet, exchange and develop their own ideas with like-minded peers;
- **Support for youth organisations and youth initiative**: Youth non-government organisations could be seen as a main source for the provision of non-formal education in the rural areas which is an effective way for personal development of young people, therefore needs to be recognized and supported;
- **Improvement of transportation services**;
- **Environmental protection and sustainability**: Creation of a sense of responsibility in young people for the protection of the environment and raising awareness of whole population about the concept of Sustainability and Sustainable Development;
- **More opportunities for developing of talents**: Creating spaces and opportunities (in Youth Centers) for rural young people to develop their talents and practice their hobbies.

III. Youth in diverse societies

Problems identified:

- ❖ **Existence of stereotypes and prejudices**: Bulgarian rural young people have a lot of stereotypes and prejudices towards minority groups;
- ❖ **Lack of interaction**: young people from both majority and minority groups do not communicate and interact with each other. There is a lack of mutual understanding;
- ❖ **Low educational status**: minority groups (especially Roma) have low educational level which is one of the reasons for the isolation of these groups;
- ❖ **Ineffective youth policies of inclusion**: youth policies are not effective in including young people from ethnic and religious minorities;
- ❖ **Discrimination**: many cases of discriminatory practices are existent especially related to job applications and employment;
- ❖ **Youth poverty**: many youngsters of minority groups suffer from lack of money and even live in a great poverty.

Our Demands:

- **Creating spaces for communication and interaction** between majority and minority groups;
- **Information as a tool for inclusion**: Raising awareness about different cultures and religions as a way of creating mutual understanding between citizens about minority groups and ensuring better integration of these groups;
- **Better education**: Ensuring the provision of a better education that creates tolerance and understanding. Raising the educational level of minority groups in effective way with respect to their character and needs;
- **Raising awareness about the rights and responsibilities** of all the citizens of the country;
- **Usage of microfinance practices**: Innovative microfinance practices should be used to increase the financial condition of minority groups and even extend them to the whole population so as to create interlinks between individuals and a better inclusion of minorities.

IV. The role of youth, youth organisations and authorities in the process of development and change

✚ **Youth**: We, the participants of the project “The Voice of Youth – The Voice of Change!” and members of YMDRAB believe that all young people should clearly understand their rights and responsibilities as active citizens and members of the Society. We believe that we need to be more critical about the processes that take place in our country and positively contribute to these processes. Solidarity and respect for individuals should drive the actions of young people resulting in overcoming prejudice and eradicating discrimination. As citizens we should take an active part in the society and be the change that we would like to see.

✚ **Youth organisations**: As representatives of the Youth Movement for Development of the Rural Areas in Bulgaria (YMDRAB), we believe that youth organisations should take an active role in the process of sustainable rural development. Youth organisations should be open, inclusive and democratic allowing for individuals to develop their skills and jointly contribute to the establishment of a youth-friendly environment. Their mission should be to help all the young people to realize their potential and support the development of our country and the European project. Youth organisations should deliver quality non-formal education as a main tool for building strong individuals, active citizens and well-educated experts.

✚ **Authorities:** We call to the attention of the authorities to the importance of young people as a driver of change in the Society. Particularly, we believe that rural youth is the unrevealed potential of our society. Therefore, youth policies, projects and initiatives should focus on the development of opportunities for rural youngsters to realize its potential and actively contribute to the governance of our community. In line with the demands previously stated, we believe that:

- ✓ **Youth organisations should be recognized** for the added value they bring to the society. Financial support should be provided for the effective implementation of their youth initiatives especially in the rural areas;
- ✓ **Establishment and support in establishment of Youth Centers** across the rural areas of the country should be undertaken by authorities;
- ✓ **Innovative youth policies** should be created and implemented effectively addressing the challenges that rural young people face;
- ✓ **Exchange of knowledge and experience** should be implemented on European and global level allowing for benefiting from existing best practices in other countries;
- ✓ **Co-management structures** should be established on local and regional level, where decisions about the governance of municipalities and regions should be jointly taken between authority representatives and youth;
- ✓ **Educational reforms** should be undertaken resulting in education focused on the development of each individual considering personal characters and abilities. The education should allow for building strong but tolerant individuals;
- ✓ **Non-formal education should be recognized** for its role in developing the personalities of individuals;
- ✓ **Promotion of entrepreneurship** and support for entrepreneurs should be implemented tackling the unemployment and improving the economic parameters of the country;
- ✓ **The “Youth Guarantee” should be effectively implemented** as a measure for overcoming youth unemployment and the impact of the recent financial crisis that affected our European community;
- ✓ **Higher investment in eco-projects** and sustainability practices should be undertaken by the authorities responsible and whole society.

Thank you very much for your attention!