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## Interview: V. S, Advisor for Association Communication at a youth organisation in Berlin

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THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR AGREEING TO DO THE INTERVIEW WITH ME AND SHARING YOUR EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE. I WOULD START BY ASKING A FEW QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR TARGET GROUP. AND ABOUT THE PARTICIPATION STRUCTURES THAT YOU HAVE WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION. MY FIRST QUESTION IS:

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE YOUNG PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH OR WHO ARE PART OF YOUR ORGANISATION? AND I WOULD BE PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN THAT: ARE THERE ALSO DISADVANTAGED YOUNG PEOPLE AND IF SO, WHAT DISADVANTAGES DO THEY EXPERIENCE AND HOW DOES THIS SHOW?

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**V.S:** So I would say these are people between 16 and... Actually, we don't have such a strict upper limit. Based on the applications and the formalities, the youth association defines itself as being up to 26, but in fact everyone is welcome here, including people over 27. I would say that the target group we reach and who participate in our events is up to about 40 years old. I would separate it a bit. On the one hand, the target group of active members of the association and then the target group of the public who come to events on a one-off or non-binding basis.

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I UNDERSTOOD YOU AS SAYING THAT THE ACTIVE PART IS RATHER THE YOUNGER PART AND THE AUDIENCE THAT COMES TO EVENTS CAN ALSO BE OLDER?

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**V.S:** Exactly. We already ask this for the formalities, but in practical everyday life it doesn't really matter. It should in no way be a criterion for exclusion. And with regard to discrimination, I also have the impression that our location and also the Berlin location in general - we reach people who have diverse life narratives. For example, because of class, race or migration. It's quite a colourful mix. And I would say what we focus on is how the person describes themselves, for example whether they describe themselves as a BIPOC person or as queer. So one target group that we specifically address at the events is FLINTA, so women, lesbians, inter, non-binary and trans people. And these event formats are also well received. But we have also held a few events specifically for cis men, and that has also been well received. When we navigate the event structure, it is firstly through the category of gender. But in terms of the realities of life, these are really very different people. I have to be honest and say that people who are in training or studying are much more common than people who live in precarious circumstances or are unemployed. So the active part consists mainly of people who study. Apprenticeships now and then, but yes...

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**I WOULD BE INTERESTED TO KNOW WHAT KIND OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING YOUR ORGANISATION HAS. WHAT IS YOUR SELF-CONCEPTION?**

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**V.S.:** We describe ourselves as a youth association in which young people make self-determined politics. That's quite general at first, but with the educational work we do, you can already see that we position ourselves as left-wing. We have a critical approach to work. And for us that also means doing educational work. We support educational events and also events that are focused outside the field of education.

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**YOU JUST SAID THAT YOU ALSO HAVE THE ASPECT OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN YOUR SELF-IMAGE. THAT YOUNG PEOPLE CAN MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS ABOUT POLITICS. COULD YOU PERHAPS TELL US A BIT ABOUT WHETHER YOU HAVE MODELS OR PROCESSES THAT ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE CAN PARTICIPATE AND THAT THEY CAN PARTICIPATE IN A SELF-DETERMINED WAY?**

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**V.S.:** So that's what we try to guarantee, through the association structure. We as an association have three part-time office positions that are supposed to keep the framework. The voluntary board, which according to the statutes should consist mainly of people under 27, is responsible for the content. If you want to deviate from this, you need a decision from the general meeting, which meets once a year. In the best case, there is a rough focus on content from the board and then young people can become active. So they can be organized in a working group of our association or they can come up with an idea on their own initiative. And the task of the office is then to implement this idea or to support the young people to such an extent that they are relieved of certain formal things, e.g. providing funding. So that they can focus more on the content. And so reports, lists of participants, organizational purchasing at the front are more the tasks of the office staff.

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**SO THAT THEY CAN FOCUS MORE ON POLITICAL WORK AND THE ORGANISATIONAL PART IS DONE BY THE PROFESSIONALS IN THE OFFICE?**

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**V.S.:** Exactly. We simply try not to reject every idea that comes along, but to implement it in some way, if possible. If it has to be modified, e.g. in the case of holiday camps, the formal condition is that there have to be at least eight participants for the event to be billable, then that is something we tell people. If they say they are not enough people as a group, then we try to do additional advertising so that even more people come together. It's definitely not to fail because of that and I also have to say that I find it very valuable when people come. Be it "I want to do a food stall, I want to do an information stall, I just want us to support this appeal, that we do a seminar on this." On the one hand, we are very dependent on this, but also very welcome, because it is then our task to somehow put this on paper, but also to translate it into reality.

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SO THE PEOPLE WHO ARE ACTIVE WITH YOU AND, FOR EXAMPLE, ARE ALSO ON YOUR BOARD AND HAVE A LEADING ROLE - HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THESE YOUNG PEOPLE?

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**V.S.:** In fact, a certain degree of experienced politicization. I would say that from experience. Of course, we are open to everyone and of course we also accompany people during their own moments of politicization. But I also notice that many of those who come already bring a lot of knowledge and insights with them. I would say that these are people who want change and who are resistant. They are critical and take a critical look at society.

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IN OUR PROJECT WE ARE DEALING WITH THE THREE TOPICS "INCLUSION, SUSTAINABILITY AND DIGITALISATION" - TOPICS THAT ARE PART OF THE EU YOUTH STRATEGY. I HAVE NOW ASKED YOU A LOT ABOUT PARTICIPATION AND OPPORTUNITIES TO HAVE A SAY. TO WHAT EXTENT DO THE OTHER TWO TOPICS PLAY A ROLE FOR YOU, I.E. SUSTAINABILITY AND DIGITALISATION?

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**V.S.:** So sustainability in the sense of passing on knowledge. Sometimes people are active with us and then something changes in their lives: they get a university place, a Master's place, they want to move to another city, they have a child, they start their professional life... and then they slowly slip away. And that's where we already try to make sure that the accumulated knowledge or experience doesn't go away with the person, but is passed on. As a left-wing youth organisation, we are of course also interested in not further deteriorating the environment around us, but in dealing with it responsibly. For example, through practical things like which washing-up liquid we buy and how we cook at our events. We are already trying to promote sustainability. The association got to know about digitalisation with Corona and I quickly looked at the measures of digital education. Or how to translate educational events into the digital space. I learned that pretty quickly. I would say that there is quite a difference: the digitalisation in youth work. That Corona is a milestone or a turning point. We realised that it has enormous advantages when people can participate digitally. People with disabilities or who are dependent on certain conditions that we cannot guarantee in our seminar room, for example, because it has few barriers but is not barrier-free, can still participate from home. People from Berlin or from anywhere can participate. This would otherwise not be possible without the digital space. But it is also a different kind of togetherness. When there's a break, you're alone and you can't go out with others and talk about what you've seen and experienced. And have a nice finish in a bar afterwards. It has played a significant role since Corona. For example, we have now extended the Zoom account further because it is proving to be insanely practical. If our board members are in different places and still want to coordinate things, it's made possible in the digital space. Otherwise, the board meeting could not exist.

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I NOW COME TO MY LAST TOPIC, WHICH IS ABOUT THE ISSUES OF INTEREST REPRESENTATION. YOU SAID AT THE BEGINNING OF THE INTERVIEW THAT WITH THE ASSOCIATION YOU ENABLE YOUNG PEOPLE TO DO POLITICAL

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**WORK AND SUPPORT THEM IN DOING SO. NOW I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW WHAT YOU THINK IS NECESSARY TO IMPROVE THE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE?**

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**V.S.:** So intuitively it occurs to me that it always means a lot to young people when, despite their young age, e.g. when they are not yet of age, they experience that they are taken seriously. And that what they say and express can be totally guiding for us, as full-time workers who are much older. So when they express an idea at a plenary session, at a meeting, and then experience that we don't reject the idea but actually take it up and try to implement it, I experience a tremendous moment of empowerment. And I notice that young people are not used to being seen as experts. Another thing that comes to my mind is, for example, error-friendliness. I also appreciate that very much in our work. No matter what mistake is made, no one is ever - maybe annoyed sometimes - but it's never a reason to... So a mistake-friendly culture is lived. No one has to resign or leave office because of a mistake. What is important is that people talk and that everyone tries to find a solution. It doesn't matter what the mistake was or who made it. I also find it incredibly motivating that no one is looking for someone to blame. Because many people are also doing something for the first time, e.g. giving a lecture or preparing a presentation on a topic. Or standing in front of a group for the first time. And when they receive appreciative feedback, I always feel that it is a strengthening moment and I hope that they can build on such moments. Acknowledging and giving weight to what is said, granting expertise.

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**IN WHICH NETWORKS ARE YOU REPRESENTED AS A REGIONAL ASSOCIATION AND IN WHICH NETWORKS DO YOU PERHAPS ALSO HAVE CONTACT WITH POLITICAL DECISION-MAKERS?**

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**V.S.:** Through our child and youth welfare institutions in the districts - in the district youth councils. There is then a delegate who also represents the interests vis-à-vis the youth welfare offices, district offices. At the national level there is also our organization. This enables networking throughout Germany. For example, we regularly take part in the meetings of the main staff to see how things are going in other places. Our local group, our regional association, is special at the national level because we are the only association that has its own association. The others don't have that. I would say that this has come about a bit historically for us. And that gives us a special room for manoeuvre. In fact, I also have to say that we are not so much interested in talking to the bigwigs in the federal government. It's more that we are on the level of "neighbourhood and neighbourhood places", for example the school next door that organises a street festival. For us, these are also political actors that are important. Or self-organised groups that start an appeal or ask for a publication on the homepage or for inclusion in the newsletter. So we tend to support smaller actors. Precisely because we are convinced that we have a structure from which you can benefit and which we are happy to share.

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THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR THIS WONDERFUL INTERVIEW. I WAS VERY HAPPY THAT YOU TOOK THE TIME.

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