

Municipality of Thermi, Thessaloniki,
Region of Central Macedonia, Greece



Youth Council Municipality Thermi



Keyword(s):

young adults,

empowerment,

confidence building

civic skills - social literacy



Introduction

This document is a short presentation of an innovative initiative undertaken by the Municipality of Thermi. The initiative aimed to encourage and empower young adults living in the communities of the Municipality to participate more actively in social events through the creation of a Youth Council. Although Youth Councils are not a new idea or a new institution the approach followed by the Municipality of Thermi is radical since for the first time in Greece and in the European Union, the sociocratic paradigm is applied as a model of organization and procedural framework for formal decision-making. The experience of the Municipality of Thermi from the application of this particular model of organization has shown that sociocracy not only has the potential to be applied especially in municipalities which are made up of many remote communities, but also that due to the autonomy and equality that it promotes, it creates a dynamic of participation that can contribute

catalytically to the activation of youth and their active participation in what happens in local communities and the formulation of local policies for each community.

Main challenge

It is widely recognized (e.g., from the Council of Europe, UNESCO, etc.) that the development of democratic societies relies heavily on the creativity, dynamism, social commitment, and civic skills of youth. Young adults in Greece were one of the social groups that was hit hard by the economic crisis. The consequences of the economic crises were evident among all young adults of all social strata and especially among middle and working-class youth. For example, in the area of employment Greece has one of the highest youth unemployment rates (around 35%) compared to the European average (17.8%). This situation, combined with a number of other social processes, has created a climate of disengagement of young adults from the political and social life. Young adults feel that their voice is not heard by politicians and generally by those who design and decide the policies that affect them. There is thus a generalized sense of exclusion and rejection which acts as a barrier to their participation in the social and political life of the communities in which they live. This situation seems to have been further exacerbated by the measures imposed as a result of the pandemic COVID-19 crisis we are currently experiencing. The main challenge was to reverse the aforementioned negative attitude and create an environment where young adults of the 14 communities that comprise the Municipality can express themselves and get involved more actively in the social and political life locally and regionally.

Timing

The initial thoughts for the initiation of the project started in 2019 and after almost one year of planning, consultations, and creative debate the actual implementation of the project started on June 2020 a few months after the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown was introduced to Greece. The pandemic was not seen as an impediment but as an additional challenge.

Objective

The objective of the initiative was to develop a model for the formation of a young adults and youth organization that could empower and emancipate its members youth to take action on issues and questions that concern them through synergies, networking, extroversion, and consultation. A model that, on top of everything else, could be implemented and give a sense of unified action to young adults from 14

different communities, each with its own specific social and cultural characteristics. The vision, purpose and values of the Youth Council that was formed may be summarized as follows: The empowerment and emancipation of young adults (up to the age of 29) who live or work in the Municipality of Themi. In addition, the active participation of young adults in decision-making at the local level, through highlighting issues, proposing plans, and participating in decision-making in areas that directly or indirectly concern their generation (i.e., confidence building and social skills development). Finally, the training of young adults in a new democratic decision-making process (civic skills) in a participatory way for the actions that they consider important for their place.

Target group

Young people and young adults (from the age of 15 up to the age of 29)

Geographical range

The geographical range of the initiative was the Municipality of Themi. The Municipality of Themi is a municipality of the Region of Central Macedonia (Northern Greece) that was established on January 1, 2011, following the merging of the 3 pre-existing municipalities (Vasilika, Themi and Mikra). The municipality includes 14 local communities whose population varies significantly (from 263 – 16.000 inhabitants) and which are geographically located in an area of about 385,000 acres. The overall population of the municipality is 53 201 people.

Stakeholders and partners

For the development of the project the Department of Education, Youth and Social Affairs of the Municipality of Themi worked together with members of the Hellenic Centre for Sociocracy (<https://www.sociocracy.gr/>) while there was also cooperation with the Hellenic Open University (www.eap.gr) and more specifically the Laboratory for Biographical Learning and Transformative Education.

The Directorate of Education Youth and Social Affairs also worked together with the Local Councils of the 14 communities that belong to the Municipality of Themi, as well as with local cultural associations, schools and sport teams to disseminate the idea.

Strategy / materials

The strategy for the implementation is on-going. However, the first steps were:

- Creation of an Implementation Circle i.e., a working group for the design and creation of the Thermi Youth Council. The members of the Implementation Circle implemented 11 meetings of 3 hours. The group consisted of 8 people (Municipality of Thermi staff, citizens, and elected officials).
- Creation of a youth group that acted as a feedback group for drafting the organizational scheme. A 3-hour meeting was implemented in which 8 young people aged 15-29 took part.
- Creation of a dissemination team.
- Creation of a registry of potential members of the Youth Council of the Municipality of Thermi.
- Presentation of the sociocratic model of decision-making to the young people who registered in the registry of members of the Youth Council of the Municipality of Thermi. 3 meetings were implemented in which 80 people participated.
- Creation of the first five local circles.
- Thirty 3-hour meetings/trainings of the first five local youth circles (until July 2020).
- Networking of all Local Circles and closing the first phase in a 3-hour meeting in July 2020.
- Creation of a Project Monitoring Circle (as an evolution of the Implementation Circle).
- Implementation of organizational meetings with the Directorate of Education, and Local Circles to prepare events.
- The Local Circles implemented 71, 3-hour meetings between October and February 2021 to discuss issues that concern their local communities.

Resources

For the implementation of the initiative the Municipality of Thermi allocated 3 full time employees were actively involved in the project as part of their overall responsibilities in the area of education and youth. Moreover, two sociocracy experts and animators were contracted to support the development of the initiative. To disseminate the project, we used conventional (e.g., newspaper articles, event) and electronic media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). The whole project was financed by the Municipality of Thermi. Moreover, a small group of volunteers supported the implementation (the volunteers were affiliated with Greek public Universities)

Compliance with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Our strategy is in alignment with SDG 4. However, the mobilization and sensitization of the young adults of the Municipality towards a more participative and sustainable models of lifestyle complies with many of the 17 goals set by the UN for Sustainable Development (e.g., sustainable cities and communities, gender equality, peace, justice)

Innovation(s)

The main innovation of the initiative is that for the first time the model of sociocracy was introduced as the governing model (operation, decision-making) of the Youth Council. In the sociocracy model there are some basic operating rules that are briefly presented below: (a) Decision-making by consensus: in this model, decisions are taken by consensus, i.e., they are taken when no member of the group raises a major objection. When there is an objection then through an interactive process the discussion continues until a consensus decision is reached. Decisions always have the consent of all members. This means that there is no question of the predominance of some artificial majority which may have geographical or partisan characteristics (b) The circle: sociocracy is based on the operation of circles. In addition to the basic organizational group made up of all members, it is possible at both local and general level to create circles that are charged with a specific task. Each circle sets its own rules of operation based on the principle of consensus. (c) The double link: in a classic model of hierarchical governance, the head (e.g. the President) ensures communication from the highest levels to the grass roots and vice versa. Ensuring these two functions is often a difficult task and a source of disagreement, confusion, and power. In sociocracy, instead of a single head, a dual relationship is created between each circle and the circle of the next level; and (d) Elections without a candidate: The selection of individuals to a position of responsibility or even the simple assignment of a job to a member of a circle is done through a ballot without declared candidates and combinations. Each circle member nominates the person he or she considers most suitable for the assignment and argues for his or her choice. The selection shall always be made on the basis of the principle of consensus.

Evaluation

The project is an on-going project, and it has not been so far evaluated in a typical or any other form of summative. However, some form of formative evaluation is implemented continuously throughout the year through informal interviews with the members of the existing Local Circles.

Impact

In 2022 six (6) active Local Circles are operating in the Municipality of Thermi, representing so far eight different communities. Due to the pandemic and the restrictive measures, several of the events of the local circles are held using online digital tools. Examples of such events were: (a) an online event on: The role of the Municipality in the management of stray animals, (b) an online event on "What model of citizen is needed in our era?", (c) an online event on "Domestic violence and violence against women during the pandemic period". In addition, all the Local Circles of the Youth Council of the Municipality of Thermi continuously respond to invitations for joint actions by institutions, social structures and associations, contributing decisively to the success of many voluntary and charitable actions. The actions of the Youth Council of the Municipality of Thermi continue despite the problems created by the pandemic. From the above we may state that the impact has been positive as the actions taken by the Youth council showed that young adults can be successfully involved in social and democratic processes even in times of crises like the pandemic.

Impediments

The challenges that the project faced were both internal and external. Internally, due to the novel model of decision-making that sociocracy advocates we had to challenge our assumptions and presuppositions about what constitutes a proper process of governance. Fortunately, the Mayor and the Vice-Mayor were very supportive of the idea.

Externally we confronted the restrictions of the Covid 19 pandemic. The application of sociocracy requires human interaction and full mind-body-spirit participation. In a computer-mediated environment it was difficult (but not impossible) to apply the sociocratic innovative model.

Replicability

Based on the experience in the diverse Municipality of Thermi we believe that there is room to replicate our approach in other cities and regions in Greece and Europe. Sociocracy is not a new idea. However, it seems that it has never been applied to formal public decision-making organizations like a Youth Council. Our experience is that it can be applied if there is political commitment. However, since the application is a complex process we recommend the involvement of sociocratic advisors and animators that will oversee and enhance the whole process.

Concluding remarks

The Municipality of Thermi, in the context of its actions as a member of the UNESCO Learning Cities network and in order to support the activation of the young adults of its communities, launched an innovative and original project to create a Youth Council based on the sociocratic model of organization. The implementation of the project, has shown that if there is a framework that ensures equal participation, equality of expression, but also independence and autonomy in action, it is possible to attract young adults who can develop collective actions of substance and thus contribute to the broader project of creating democratic and participatory local communities.

Website/Social Media profile(s) of the initiative

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/youthcouncilmunicipalityofthermi/>

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