

Youth Program and Youth Processes:

Challenges in Dealing with Different Interests between Organized and Unorganized Youth

Paper presented at Seminar *Civil Society, Social Capital and Social Work*,
Havana, Cuba, 13th to 17th of December 2004

By Hans Petter Sand,
Agder University College, Kristiansand, Norway

Summary

In this paper I will describe the development of a program directed at youth problems in a mid-sized Norwegian town. The town is characterized by a rich variety of voluntary associations. Voluntary associations can be seen as a central part of Norwegian civil society.

Along with describing the development of the program, I will describe the target groups of youngsters in the town center. Possessing little social capital in terms of organization, contact with and the ability to articulate their needs to the authorities in charge of the program, the target groups became losers in respect of the program. The program became dominated by organized groups and voluntary associations with more social capital as far as the program was concerned.

Youth Groups and Cultures

The issues I will address here are youth problems, as defined by the local authorities, in a mid-sized Norwegian town. Furthermore, I will describe and analyze a public program with a view to improving these problems.

The data is based on my own research (Sand, 1997), studies done by research institutes (Saeter, 2000), (Bjorgo, Carlsson and Haaland, 2001), (Carlsson, 2003), (Carlsson, 2004) and finally a study of graffiti-painters in the same town center (Reed, 1998). All these studies are aimed at the same target groups. It will thus be possible to see changes in these youth groups over time and to see the public program in the context of the groups in question.

My presentation here will follow, by and large, the chronological order used in the studies mentioned.

Initially, I was asked by the local authorities to try to map various groups of young people idling about in the town center. The youngsters were those not taking part in any kind of organized activities, of which there are many in the town center.

At the time of my research study, there seemed to be quite a strong structural desire to establish an open house for unorganized and potentially troublesome youth groups. The potential building was already there, as was the financial support from the Norwegian government. In my opinion, the only thing lacking was the actual decision of the local authorities to propose this place as a program for preventive measures directed at potential youth problems. However, the house, an old industrial building, was situated some hundred meters outside the center of the town.

At the time of my research, from the summer of 1994 until the summer of 1995, I discovered and described 13 different youth groups, each with a distinct culture, in the town center (Sand, 1997). I found that the various groups could be seen to form concentric circles, presumably based on a rural/urban dimension and a class dimension. By and large, urban, higher-class youth had their place in the heart of the town center, whereas rural and/or lower class youth kept to the periphery, circling around the center.

I also took a closer look at the relationship between the various groups. What I found was that they appeared to be quite indifferent to one another, at most talking somewhat ironically about each other.

However, there seemed to be a latent conflict between some anti-racist groupings and some Nazi-oriented groupings.

Civil Society and Social Capital

I would like to connect my descriptions and analyses to the concepts of *civil society* and *social capital*. Alternatively, I could have used the concepts *inclusion* and *exclusion*, which are widely used in sociology and other modern social sciences, and which would also capture the processes at hand.

Civil society often now refers to those areas of social life that are self-organized and therefore fall outside both the capitalist market and the government with its bureaucracy. The meaning of the concept has changed throughout the ages. In accordance with the political ideas developing towards the end of the 18th century, about the rights of the individual and about drawing a line between economy, society and state, civil society eventually came to mean the areas of collective life not having any involvement from public authorities, although the same authorities were still supposed to protect the freedom of these areas. Civil society came to be seen as an autonomous sphere, and a person who further elaborated on the concept was the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937). Gramsci maintained that civil society consisted of those areas of collective and organizational life falling outside both state and economy; labor unions, religious associations, cultural life and so on.

The concept of civil society re-entered the social sciences in the 1980's, such as in connection with the analyses of tendencies of governance and legitimacy crises in late capitalism.

Social capital usually refers to accumulated resources, real or potential, tied to stable group membership or network relationships. Social capital will thus express itself in the form of relationships providing increasing power. In certain contexts or fields, it may increase the value of other types of capital, for instance economic and cultural capital. This in turn will generate certain favorable results for the group members compared to non-group members.

The value of this social capital will depend on the extension and quality of the individual person's network, more specifically on how long he has belonged to a given position, on the investments made to establish and maintain positions and relationships, and on the knowledge about and the ability to mobilize means that can only be accessed through the network.

Samsen – a House for Youth Activities

Samsen is the local nickname of the above-mentioned industrial building (an old, shut-down slaughterhouse). The local authorities bought the house to rebuild it into a culture center - a house for activities for young people and a house for voluntary organizations.

There were two reasons why the local authorities decided to buy and restore the old slaughterhouse. The house where voluntary associations and clubs had had their localities, the so-called 'House for Military Training', had been taken over by the university college in town. Therefore the associations were in need of new premises (Saeter, 2000).

At the same time, the problems among town youth had become visible, and it was desirable to establish systematic programs to improve the environment for younger generations.

Political decisions had been made to do something for the youth in the center of town, and several measures had been proposed. These measures all involved some sort of open house for non-organized young people in the town center.

'Project Samsen' was to meet the dual demand of serving as new premises for voluntary associations and clubs on the one hand, and being an open house for non-organized groups of potential problem-generating youngsters in the town center on the other. Samsen was intended to cover the need for space-demanding preventive measures, where different groups could activate themselves side by side.

The local authorities apparently thought this dual goal could be achieved under one and the same roof. They chose to base the project on the so-called voluntary sector, which in social science terminology is also referred to as 'the third sector:' the market is seen as the first sector, the state the second sector, and the voluntary associations the third sector.

The local authorities' intentions are evident in the following statement:

"The Committee of Cultural Affairs requests for the town architect to try and find a location for meetings and activities in the center (of town), which will function the same way as the previous association center in the 'House for Military Training'. The activities of the voluntary associations are highly valued *per se*, and have great importance in a preventive perspective in relation to children and young people" (quoted from the application for the establishment of Samsen, 11.13. 1992, in Saeter, 2000, my translation).

During a period around 1994, there were many problems with the financial calculations of the Samsen Project, attracting much criticism in the local newspaper. However, after a heated public debate on the local radio, TV and newspaper, Samsen became a reality.

According to Saeter (2000), the financial miscalculations formed an important basic argument for the Samsen opposition, and yet there were other reasons weighing heavier for the opposition in this period. A lot of people maintained that the localization of Samsen was not fit for the target group, those remaining on the 'margins' of street life. Samsen was conceived as being too far away from the main street, where young people usually gathered in the evenings and nights, and where most of the discotheques, bars and pubs were located.

Saeter (2000:21) sums up and analyzes the first phase of the planning and the opposition of Samsen this way:

A Cultural Collision

More important than such arguments (economic miscalculations, location with respect to target groups, (my remarks)), was probably the 'town culture' as a reinforcing factor to the opposition. Samsen represents something 'dangerous' in such a town, which in many ways has the same characteristics as a small town. The town has long traditions as a town full of chapels, and consists of many small local communities that may bear the traits of rural communities. It is regarded as a value in itself to keep young people inside these small units. What is associated with urban, modern ways of expression and "street culture" becomes threatening. Many newspaper articles also dealt with this topic, i.e., that young people were drawn to the dangerous center, and that the town center – and Samsen – represented something sinful, insecure and dangerous.

A lot of things built up and the opposition against Samsen developed.

"We must take this story of opposition and negative attitude into account when Samsen is to be evaluated (my translation)."

Saeter did a survey among the young people who visited Samsen after the opening, around 1998. Out of 100 questionnaires, 57 were answered. The activities taking place on the day of the questionnaire were the following:

Rehearsing in a music band; 4, going to the discotheque; 3, surfing on the internet; 3, working at the house (the Samsen was also intended to be a workplace for unemployed youth);

7, climbing the climbing wall; 4, going to the art school; 14, going to meetings in various associations; 15, eating or just going to the café; 5, just dropping in; 2.

In a summary of the survey, Saeter stated that about 75 per cent of those going to Samsen, had a formal or organized relation to the place, the rest had an informal connection.

Those who had been going to Samsen for the longest time had seen changes day by day. They had seen how Samsen had been in a chaotic state with construction work, noise and fuss. Now the house was full of activity and enthusiasm; the house was almost finished, and many young people came there. But then the hustle and bustle settled down, as each of the various organized groups appeared to have found their place in the house, and they seemed to live a life apart from the other groups.

Saeter gave this analysis:

“Indications were that even though Samsen was utilized by many young people, it was first of all used for organizational purposes and the people using the place led an orderly life in the house. At the same time, the silence that some people now felt characterized the house further indicated that the house was no central and active meeting place for unorganized activity (Saeter, 2000:60, my translation, her emphasis).”

Even though the café at Samsen was seen as successful in many ways, it did not become a gathering place for youngsters idling around in the town center, and who had been a target group for the program.

The tolerance level for noise and deviance seemed to be low at Samsen, and thus it became a place for successful young people. People among the local authorities, the managers of the house and some organized groups feared that the place would gain a bad reputation. There was the fear that Samsen would be perceived as a place full of “hip-hoppers” and gangs. In some analyzing remarks by Saeter (2000:61):

“Samsen became a strong norm zone, with adults or well-adjusted young people, not a sanctuary for youngsters with different interests and ways of expressing themselves. In this way, Samsen fit perfectly into the existing local culture in town, a culture that was a combination of a small town conformity culture and the religious fear of sin. The local authorities and the managers of the house were caught in the crossfire of how to create a house for street kids and at the same time achieve legitimacy among the public and local politicians (my translation)”.

Graffiti Painters

I will now turn to a description of the graffiti painters of the town in question, based on a study by Reed (1998). The author here writes about what is termed ‘the new type of graffiti’. In the beginning of the 1990s, one could see a few surrealistic slogans painted with spray cans in the town. A few years later, however, a new type of painting and writing in public places appeared. These paintings resembled the kind of paintings associated with urban slums or ghettos in modern cities around the world, characterized by great social problems, a multi-ethnic population and often by being suppressed by the rest of society. Could these latter qualities present a clue to understanding the strong spread of graffiti in the town in question?

The new type of graffiti has different names. The American sociologist Graig Castleman (1995) calls it ‘Subway Graffiti’, because graffiti painters in New York preferred subway trains for their canvas. Some people call it ‘hip-hop graffiti’ because it has merged with the hip-hop culture, while others use the concept ‘spray can art’, because of the tools used. The Swedish art historian Staffan Jacobsen (1990) uses the concept of TTP graffiti, representing ‘tags,

throw-ups and pieces', i.e., the three basic forms of graffiti. A 'tag' is a signature on a wall or something like that, often written in Indian ink instead of using spray cans, a 'piece' is a larger painting usually with elaborated letters, and a 'throw-up' is a large, blown up tag or a quick piece painted in only one or two colors, 'thrown up on a wall'.

Reed's study is based on interviews with twelve graffiti painters in the town in question. They all refer to themselves as writers.

The first real writer in town, had 'Gaz' as his signature, and started to write his signature around 1990-91. He got his inspiration from the movie 'Beat Street', a hip-hop movie made by Harry Belafonte in 1984. 'Gaz' and a friend of his formed the first 'crew' in town, calling themselves OBT, Original Bomb Tribe. A crew is a team of painters using their own name. The first writers did most of their writings in Indian ink and wrote tags. Another crew was formed in 1994, naming themselves RAF, Royal Aerosol Force. Aerosol originally means a fog of colored particles, and the concept is often used as a synonym for TTP graffiti. This crew made pieces that for some years were regarded by other writers as the best in town. In 1995 they changed their name to Crew Number One.

In 1994, a lot of young people started to paint, and with the 'generation of 1994' a certain amount of graffiti appeared, and larger groups of writers were established. It was no longer just a couple of small, scattered groups of friends. The writers now came from all over town.

A couple of very active '94-ers' took up graffiti painting in the wake of a squatting. In the spring of 1994, an anti-racist organization and a group of unorganized youngsters occupied an old house owned by the local authorities. The youngsters named the house 'Utopia' and started negotiating with the local authorities about turning the house into an open house run by the young people themselves. But although the representatives of the local authorities seemed quite positive, the local authority administration evidently did not want a house of this type. The negotiations lasted for many months, and in the late summer of 1994 the squatting died out.

According to Reed, the town is so small that it does not take long until people meet when they engage in the same activities. Some of the '94-ers' started the crew NTU, Nerds of the Underground, and for some time in 1995 they actively 'bombed' the center of the town. To bomb means to cover a large area with tags and throw-ups very rapidly.

In 1995, the crew NOK, Norsk Organisert Kunst [Norwegian Organized Art] was established, and together with RAF it was the most prominent crew in town. Until the fall of 1997, RAF had a reputation among writers for being the best crew in town.

The above-mentioned Samsen had gained importance for the town's graffiti writers. Samsen aimed, at least partly, at attracting youth that fell outside existing organized activities in town. In the fall of 1995 Samsen set up a day of free activities, among these a graffiti competition. The competition was held in an area with large concrete surfaces below the old slaughterhouse. The managers of Samsen had bought spray cans and the winner of the competition received a prize in the form of an art painting. Since then, the area below Samsen has been covered with graffiti. The writers perceived this as 'legal walls' with no sanctions from the police. The managers of Samsen apparently did little to change this perception. However, more and more writers experienced being chased away by security officers and took this as a sign that their legal area was no longer legal. The writers realized, though, that they themselves were to blame as well, since many writers had painted quite far away from the original area where the competition had taken place. One day the manager of Samsen set up a poster aimed at the graffiti problem.

Reed maintains from her data that the quality of the graffiti has improved as a result of the free space at Samsen. Nevertheless, many of the writers had an ambivalent relationship to Samsen. They were sceptical to the local authorities, both politicians and administrators, and they were sceptical about the Samsen project itself. When the signals given about the graffiti wall were obscure and vague, it contributed to making the writers feel like strangers there.

During the fall of 1997, the intensity of graffiti painting reached new heights in town. A lot of new crews had started up in the course of the summer, and when the darkness of fall set in, these crews began bombing heavily. The most distinct of these crews named itself VSF, Vi sprayer for Goy [We spray for fun]. Apparently, this crew aimed at taking over the prominent position of NOK in town. This increased painting activity occurred at the same time as the local authorities had established a 'Tag Removal Team'. These events were undoubtedly connected to one another.

Before the Tag Removal Team had been established, the police had had the sole responsibility for performing systematic anti-tagging work in town, and quite a few youngsters had been arrested for tagging. Public authorities referred to graffiti as tagging. Some of the delinquents were prosecuted and a few cases were dismissed by court. Around New Year 1998, the police arrested many youngsters suspected of tagging. These youngsters were suspected of about 70 to 80 cases of tagging, and the first cases went to court in the spring of 1998.

Based on her data, Reed suggested that the town had 30 to 40 more or less active writers in the spring of 1998, a number that had almost doubled in the course of one year. She also maintained that the RAF crew had established themselves as well-known artists among writers at a national level.

Anti-racists and neo-Nazis

During the past ten to fifteen years, a lot of Norwegian towns and villages have experienced youth groups hostile to immigrants or espousing a neo-Nazi ideology (Bjorgo, Carlsson, Haaland, 2001). These groups have committed acts of violence and harassment against immigrants and adversaries of opinion, or they have been involved in violent conflicts with counteracting groups of anti-racists or immigrant kids. In most of these places racist groups of young people have dissolved after some time – more or less by themselves, but more often as a result of successful prevention and intervention from the public.

Ever since 1994 in the town at hand, however, there was a rather extensive neo-Nazi milieu of youngsters, by Norwegian standards. Throughout the years, these youngsters have frequently been involved in racist assaults as well as violent conflicts with other youth groups. The counteracting groups have partly consisted of defined anti-racists, and partly a milieu of multi-ethnic youngsters that has periodically had the characteristics of a gang. On one occasion, a life was lost as a consequence of such a conflict, and the same could easily have resulted from several other confrontations.

Local authorities, schools, police and voluntary associations have worked hard to fight racism and violence, to dissolve the violent milieus and to subdue the conflicts.

For periods of time, both the conflict level and the neo-Nazi groupings have been extensively reduced. The problem still exists, however, and now and then brutal confrontations take place between the neo-Nazis and the multi-ethnic groupings in town.

In my opinion, Bjorgo, Carlsson and Haaland (2000:19) present a convincing discussion and analysis of this kind of conflicts:

“There may be many and complex reasons why youth from minority backgrounds come together in groups and get involved in violent and criminal actions. A reason of particular importance is these youngsters’ proneness to getting into conflict with other youngsters or youth groups. The pioneer of American research on gangs, Frederick Thrasher (1927) stated, “*gangs are born out of strife, and nourished by conflict*”. Later research has shown that this postulate is still valid.

Immigrant youth can form gangs consisting of kids of only *one* ethnicity, or they may form multi-ethnic groups, where also ethnic Norwegian kids may take part. The axis of conflict may sometimes run between gangs of same ethnic origin, as the case has been in the recurring conflicts between Pakistani gangs in Oslo (capital of Norway, my remark). However, the dividing lines of conflict may also run between groups of majority youngsters and groups of minority youngsters. The two groups then tend to express their antagonism in the form of articulated racist and anti-racist positions and in their behavior. Yet beneath this apparent political conflict are often hidden dimensions of conflict about quite different things” (My translation).

Gateakademiet

Gateakademiet [the Street Academy] came into existence in the summer of 2000. It was located in the Samsen house, and defined its target group as youth between 15 and 25 years of age (Carlsson, 2003), who had dropped out of high school or who were unemployed. What further characterized the target group was that these youngsters seemed to be excluded from ordinary employment, and at risk of becoming dependent on benefits.

Gateakademiet was based on the experience of the independent theatre group ‘Ugress’ [Weed]. During the national professional congress of youth workers, administrators and researchers, ‘Ung I Norge’ [Being Young in Norway], held in the town in question, the group performed a play about a young boy who was trying to find a treasure. The play revolved around the young actors’ own experiences about carelessness, difficult encounters with school, the police, child welfare authorities and other public authorities, and their dreams about a better life. The young actors had professional help from playwrights and instructors, and the play was a success. In 1999, Ugress was established with assistance from a local professional multi-art artist and with economic support from the Norwegian government and the local authorities.

Ugress consisted of about ten youngsters from 16 to 25 years of age who for the most part had not adapted to school. Some of them had been using marijuana regularly and a couple of them had also been using stronger drugs. Some, but far from all, had had long-lasting and extensive contact with the public welfare system. The kids were excluded from working life and relied on benefits to get by. Those who knew these youngsters in the public welfare system characterized them as ‘oppositional’, ‘freaky’ and ‘peace-and-love kids’. It was further stated that they did not mind using lighter drugs. The group thus seemed to be a marginal group of kids, but they also differed a lot from other marginal groups in respect of their creativity and their interest in art.

Ugress could compare to a “transit harbor, a place to fill up supplies for new challenges, education, job and the like” (quote from Carlsson, 2003:9, my translation) for young people who had not succeeded in other areas in society, but who possessed much creativity and many talents.

Ugress was a very open activity where the only condition for participation was to be positive to the activity. In this program, the kids were given the chance to learn about expressions of theatre, music and film.

Several of the kids who participated in Ugress used it as a stepping stone to obtain more socially acceptable roles than that of being unemployed. One of the youngsters went to art school in Germany, another to an independent school of education in Denmark. Those who stayed in town developed a much more positive self-image by exposing their talents to the general public. A couple of the kids even attained enough self-confidence to try to overcome their dyslexia.

Ugress had powerful ways of expressing themselves. A lot of the participants loved to provoke through cultural expressions such as mimic plays, satires, various stunts and musical surprises at different stages in town.

Carlsson (2000) characterizes Ugress as an advanced program for a marginalized group of youngsters. There were no formal requirements for participation other than the youngsters' own mutual consent of being present now and then. Naturally, some took more part than others – and some less. To the instructor this was an important principle. The program was to have a low threshold and not to exclude anyone. Besides, the participants usually managed to pull themselves together, facing the upcoming appearance of a performance or a show. The result, which usually gave the spectators a good and thought-provoking cultural experience, hid a process that had often been quite disorderly. All the same, the low threshold of the program made sure that no one was excluded from the process.

Based on Ugress, public authorities wanted to develop the concept into a program. This program received the name Gateakademiet [the Street Academy].

Gateakademiet recruited youngsters with fairly large problems, such as drug abuse and psychiatric problems. The program functioned more or less as a hothouse for these kids. Gateakademiet did not become an educational program with a low threshold, but a place with no threshold, and the employees were worried that the program would get a negative label in the local community.

However, measures were taken to turn Gateakademiet into an educational program for dropouts. Changes were made during 2003, and now the participants can be characterized as a group of youngsters with smaller or more moderate problems than the above-mentioned group.

The Town

As I already touched upon in Saeter's description of the town, this is a town full of religious activity. Furthermore, it consists of many small, rural-like communities, and the general attitude is that young people should be kept in these communities and not be drawn to a potentially dangerous town center where some of the phenomena of modern urban life emerge, such as graffiti painting and street gangs in conflict with each other.

Carlsson (2004) describes the gangs of neo-Nazis and anti-racists as small and marginal groupings. They cannot be seen as representative of the town youth.

The image Norwegian people have of this town is that it is a good place to live. There are many active voluntary associations, especially religious ones.

Behind the façade, though, the town has a lot of problems; the town has a higher unemployment rate than the national average in Norway and thus it has a high proportion of young people who are unemployed or receive social welfare benefits. Furthermore, the town has a high proportion of drug addicts. Even though the town does not have a clear socially segregated population, the town center in particular has a distinctly lower standard of living compared to the rest of town.

Summing Up

I have described, in a Norwegian context, a comparatively large program aimed at preventing youth problems in a town center. But after the program had been established, the youth problems appeared to increase. When the local authorities chose to base the program on the existing voluntary associations for young people, the marginal groups seemed to become alienated from the program and even more frustrated. It all boils down to a question of social capital in civil society. The voluntary associations obviously had a lot of social capital, a good standing in the community and were on good terms with the politicians, while the marginalized groupings apparently lacked most of these resources.

References:

- Bjorgo, Tore, Yngve Carlsson and Thomas Haaland: *Generalisert hat – polarisert fellesskap* ("Generalized Hatred – Polarized Community"). NIBR-rapport 2004:20, Oslo.
- Carlsson, Yngve: *I grenselandet mellom utdanning, behandling og fritidstiltak* ("In the Border Zone Between Education, Treatment and Leisure") NIBR-notat, 2003, Oslo.
- Carlsson, Yngve and Thomas Haaland: *Voldelige ungdomsgrupper – intervensjon på kommuneniva* ("Violent Youth Groups – Intervention on Local Authority Level"), NIBR-rapport 2004:20, Oslo
- Hoigaard, Cecilie: *Gategallerier* ("Street Galleries"), Oslo, 2002
- Korsnes, Olav, Heine Andersen and Thomas Brante (ed): *Sosiologisk leksikon* ("Encyclopedia of Sociology"), Oslo, 1997.
- Reed, Lisbeth: *Taggebander eller opprørskunstnere?* ("Tag Gangs or Rebel Artists?"), University of Bergen, Bergen, 1998.
- Sand, Hans Petter: *Ungdom i sentrum* ("Youth in the Center"), Kristiansand kommune, 1997.
- Saeter, Oddrun: *Et hus midt i byen* ("A House in the Middle of the Town"), Byggforsk, 2000, Oslo.