



SUMMARY

A distinct need for revitalisation of the entire sphere of social life at the level of the local community appears in areas that both suffered the most destruction during the war and subsequently material reconstruction that is a prerequisite for the minimal quality of life. In these areas, the position of youth is especially sensitive since they are the ones that are preparing for further education, employment and family life. To effectively improve the quality of life for youth it is necessary to be more informed about their whole life situation, needs, aspirations as well as about the evaluations of their future prospects in different areas of life. With this objective, a quality of life investigation was conducted among secondary school students who live in areas of special state welfare in the Republic of Croatia. As part of the research plan consistent with the so-called developmental approach to youth, this research encompassed an evaluation of their needs as well as the strengths and resources of different local communities. Moreover, according to these findings recommendations for the development and strengthening of the communities in which youth will be active participants and contribute to the well-being of the community were elaborated.

The research was conducted in 1999 on a representative sample of 1,106 third and fourth year secondary school students living in the following towns/municipalities of special state welfare: Beli Manastir, Benkovac, Drniš, Glina, Hrvatska Kostajnica, Ilok, Knin, Korenica, Obrovac, Pakrac, Petrinja, Slunj, Topusko and Vukovar. For the purposes of this research, an extensive questionnaire on the quality of life for youth was developed. This contained the following groups of variables: sociodemographic and family structure, standard of living evaluation, the quality of residence and social relations, the conditions of life in place of residence, the planning of future and professional aspirations, social attitudes and the evaluation of the social position of youth, their social participa-

tion and free time activities. The qualitative research carried out in this study offers a more detailed depiction of the life of youth in the areas that were affected during the war. For this research, 306 secondary school students wrote essays on set questions/themes about how they see their lives in their present place of residence, their plans for the future, as well as what they should do in their place of living to improve the conditions of life for youth. The analysis of this research data included the content analysis of their essays, in which a ranked list showed how particular attitudes and opinions were distributed among students and which answers were of the most significance for them. Finally, professionals employed at the schools in which the investigations were conducted identified the most important problems of youth in their areas, evaluated the availability of different programmes for youth and the possibilities of carrying out extracurricular activities. They also suggested particular activities that would be worthwhile taking up to improve the quality of life of youth in their local communities. The application of different methods to evaluate the quality of life, as well as the data collected from different sources gave consistent results which attests the significance of the main finding of this research.

Characteristically, youth in areas of special state welfare, compared to their peers in other parts of Croatia, had more difficult experiences and life conditions during the war and post war years. The basic sociodemographic indicators show these facts. The average age of the subjects in this sample is seventeen and a half years of age. Hence, when the war started they were between nine and ten years of age. Two thirds of the subjects were in exile, as refugees or displaced persons, for four years on average. Among them more than a quarter of the youth could not return to their former place of permanent residence after the war, but had to move to other areas.

For most youth, concern about the standard of living within their own families and the feeling of insecurity which stems from this are part of their everyday lives. The data, in general, shows that a low standard of living within the family, mostly attributed to the effects of the war, is dominant in areas of special state welfare. Approximately three-quarters of youth evaluate the standard of living within their own family worse than before the war. In addition, the portion of permanently employed parents has now been reduced to half in comparison to the period before the war. The quality of life conditions in their present place of living for most youth is satisfactory, even though

one fifth of the families have not as yet resolved problems related to accommodation because they live in a flat or house that they can only use on a temporary basis. Youth are considerably less satisfied with the weak communal infrastructure in the locality where they live as well as with the unordered and neglected places and public areas.

Secondary school students that live in areas of special state welfare as opposed to different cities in the Republic of Croatia do not have equal opportunities to continue their education after primary school. In some places there is no college-preparatory secondary school, and in other places vocational secondary schools only offer highly limited programmes, which means that youth are unable to plan a better future for themselves in terms of career and employment opportunities. The possibility of continuing education after secondary school is even more limited, which will subsequently encourage an increased mobility of youth. Every second student in this sample intends to pursue tertiary education, but most of them expect that they will not be able to realise their educational aspirations because of poor financial possibilities. Over a third of the students consider that they will not be able to find employment at the end of their secondary schooling. They mainly attributed their eventual unemployment to the poor economic situation in the state. Moreover, most youth estimate that the chances of employment in their region is far slimmer compared to other parts of Croatia, and they do not expect a brighter situation in the future. Firstly, it would be worthwhile to offer students more options in terms of school types and courses. In addition, in areas with a higher concentration of youth, there is a need to open regional departments of tertiary education. Scholarships might give incentive to a number of youth to get an education in a profession that would in turn contribute to the economic development of their region. During secondary school it would also be worthwhile to give youth more professional advice and orientation, as well as to make them familiar with the economic development of their area. It is also important for youth to get early work experience and to acquire a sense of work ethics through better opportunities to practice their professional knowledge acquired in schools, voluntary work in the community as well as casual work during the summer. They also suggest the provision of a student agency that would mediate their employment opportunities enabling them to earn pocket money from time to time.

More than half of the students evaluate their place of residence as either mostly or totally unappealing for youth.

In view of the fact that a feeling of (in)security is a key aspect in the quality of life, it must be noted that the structure of the population has considerably changed in areas that were the most hardly hit by war. Approximately, one third of the students claim that it is not safe to walk the streets at night in their places of residence. Their feeling of insecurity is attributed to the fact that the areas where they live, as a consequence of the war, have been exposed to more violence and anarchy, which creates the circumstances for various forms of criminal activity. In addition, a lack of safety as a result of potential conflict on an ethnic basis appears when members of conflicting sides in war, now live in the same place. A number of subjects expressed fear of those who immigrate to their areas since the social networks that existed before the war have been destroyed.

Different war experiences have significantly influenced the attitudes and behaviour of youth. As a result of insecurity and anxiety as well as difficult conditions, a tendency to label people in their environment and a particular intolerance towards immigrants exists. Some groups of young people have not as yet returned to their homes and they have lost their sense of belonging or connection to any particular place; but nevertheless they wish to be a part of the community in which they now find themselves and live a more quality life. On the other hand, those that feel that they are the autochthonous inhabitants claim that immigrants do not like their place as they do. Subsequently, in conditions of overall frustration less tolerance towards cultural differences appears. In areas where there are different nationalities, especially in the Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Srijem counties, social networks are shaped within the same ethnic groups; because of imaginary/real dangers from provocation and eventual conflicts they avoid places where people of a different nationality gather. A long period of time and work needs to elapse in these areas before the political opinions of the adult population and those of youth can be changed. The data shows that it would be worthwhile to work more on the establishment of trust, strengthening of tolerance and non-violent conflict resolution with students that live in reintegrated areas. The consequences of war are evident in the altered interpersonal relations as well as lack of hope and the prevailing apathy within the populations. Youth claim that people have changed; that they have become selfish and are too occupied with their own concerns and that they show less love and solidarity towards others. Thus, they emphasise the need for more psychosocial support for youth and their families.

Most of the subjects mention that there are few places to go as well as a lack of different activities (cultural and sport events) for youth. They also warned that this inadequate social infrastructure often (actively) “pushes them out onto the streets”. Many groups of students emphasise a general level of poverty that equally affects local and family opportunities. On the basis of the majority’s experiences, within their local life frameworks in the areas of special state welfare it is not possible to devise a reliable life plan and future. Many obstacles with which the local population has had to deal with without substantial support “from the outside” have restricted these sorts of attempts. Hence, according to youth, it is quite rational to avoid/eradicate the obstacles - through migration.

More than a third of the youth would move to another part of the Republic of Croatia. Dissatisfaction with life in Croatia is significantly greater than dissatisfaction with life in their present place of living. Therefore, half of the participants stated that they would, if they get the opportunity, for study or work reasons move to another state. Among them, a convincing minority autonomously/freely chose places with regard to where they would like to live in the future. On the contrary, there are many more that make the same decision as a result of diverse commitments or dependencies. In other words, the collective experience of the investigated youth pre-eminently reflects the attitude: to leave is - to advance. The basic emigration push factor among youth is not only a poor standard of living, but an overall lethargy, absence of ideas, and a lack of strength to change things; that their life is empty in the local framework in which they live. Since it is realistic to expect that a considerable amount of time is required for the economic development and renewal of these areas, it is then necessary to intervene by improving the non-material quality of life (that does not require great material means) so that young people remain in these places. In this type of project it would be desirable to realise the co-operation of state bodies and the existing system of services with non-governmental, humanitarian and youth organisations. Results point out to the fact that the real burden and concern about youth’s free time and the organisation of extracurricular activities is mainly delegated to schools. On the other hand, schools have a number of difficulties with regard to holding classes at a quality level, which is their main activity; they do not have adequate staff for extracurricular activities, or material or moral support. Students and teachers also warn that poor transport links as well as expensive transport makes it more difficult to organise

any extracurricular activities for students from villages, and in this way limits the possibility of these youth to socially mix with their peers.

The content analysis of the essays with regard to the advantages and disadvantages of life and their intentions of staying or leaving the area in which they now live showed similar results. The typology of the noted advantages based on the experiences of the subjects is almost modest and is reducible to pictures of natural health and home as a non-conflict place. However, such advantages are not stimulating enough to deflect them from their intentions of emigration. This finding is consistent with the recurring noted findings of urban and ecological research in Croatia. In these investigations, subjects often state that the most important feature and advantages of the place in which they live are its natural values. If the same evidence is considered negatively, we obtain a message from youth, according to their evaluations, that the greatest advantage of the place in which they live is a circumstance that society and its system has not shaped or has only marginally participated in its shaping.

The young people who participated in this research show a maturity and responsibility with regard to their social role. They almost completely agree that it is expected that youth in society develop their personal qualities, become good citizens, facilitate the development of society, achieve higher education and oppose evil and injustice in society. However, they attribute the following as the most important reasons for the inappropriate position of youth in our society: a lack of opportunities to express their needs and opinions and a lack of understanding for youth as well as unequal opportunities in relation to the rich and the poor. Thoughts about their future are relatively mature; it is most important for them to accomplish what is necessary so that they can lead normal lives – finish school, try to become an expert in their profession, find employment and have a family. It is worrying that many of them are not certain whether they will be able to do this, even though they are only 16–18 years old. Moreover, they consider themselves to be the lost generation; still they hope that their children's lives will be better. The finding that every fourth student in this sample often feels depressed or sad and that more than a third of the students think that their futures mainly depend on external circumstances that they cannot influence shows that there is an urgent need for psychosocial support for youth as well as a need for active work with youth so that they “can take their fates into their own hands”.

According to the opinions of youth, unemployment is the biggest problem in the state. More than half of the participants also list different economic problems and approximately a third of them mentioned a low standard of living and financial crisis as the main problems. Problems related to criminality, lawlessness and different forms of social pathology are also often mentioned. However, the data shows that the researched students mainly do not show an interest in political and social events, partly because they do not trust the institutions of power. Significantly, their interests in voluntary work for the public good are greater. In any case, it would be worthwhile directing this potential and desire in young people towards similar activities. For this purpose, it is necessary to renew the entire local community; constructing a network of different citizens' associations and organisations in which the common goal would be welfare for the quality of life in a particular locality and for a stable future. Support from the outside is not enough to renew the life of destroyed communities. Hence, the initiative must come from the inhabitants themselves in local communities.

Experiences that received the highest evaluation on a scale of satisfaction in different areas were of a personal nature: family relations, health, friendships and satisfaction with one's personal qualities. In addition, the students were mainly satisfied with their lives, houses or flats in which they live as well as the ways in which they spend their free time. Answers reveal that young people mostly worry about the poor economic situation in the state and a host of other problems that are consequences of war and postwar circumstances. Thus, they describe "life in Croatia today" as a zone of dissatisfaction. Areas that were evaluated as more neutral were: place of permanent residence, neighbourhood, standard of living, school and education. The obtained division implicitly suggests the following rule: the degree to which the evaluated theme is distanced from the personal (private and family) zone determines how low the evaluation of quality will be. The group of life conditions dependent on the state and public actors in Croatia is not experienced as a guarantee of successful societal development and equitable asset division. That sort of life framework facilitates the creation of distrust in developmental intentions and the capabilities of participants from a level above the individual and family. The mentioned relation network is characteristically the behaviour of "typical" peripheral actors.

The outlined results highlight a distinct group of issues and difficulties. Namely, this is about the risks and

difficulties that are rooted in processes that entail the cynical cooling of moral sensitivity along with related processes that internally drain the local community as a foundation that guarantees life quality in relevant areas of its capabilities. The areas of special state welfare, not accounting for the smaller and richer parts, are traditionally the areas of the Croatian periphery with regard to development. That means that the process of development has been slowed down by the fact that these areas have weaker overall economic and demographic indicators. Moreover, the process of constituting the main participants of change and initiative is directly connected to the tradition of developmental and life failure. In this type of framework, the establishment of trust in the local community, in a role that guarantees collective life opportunities is mainly destined to fail. Based on this accumulation of local failures a number of initiatives to improve the conditions of life have been suggested. However, in some cases they are totally unsuitable ideas or ideas that hardly break through the borders of ordered rituals. The total effect of the mentioned attempts, as a rule, is the withdrawal of members from the local communities into a “protected” circle of handy fatalism, where passivity and dependency are at the top of the list of their most important characteristics. On this basis, demoralised local communities are shaped; communities that are not capable of clearly defining the main obstacles, and still less capable of determining their eradication.

An autonomous individual is a necessary part of the process in which quality of life, future developmental prospects and legitimacy of a community are established. Not infrequently, the attitude that encouragement of youth towards individualisation necessarily connotes underestimation of the community, tradition and solidarity is expressed. Many works based on (post)modern interpretation, by pointing out that contemporary civil society is, in fact, a post-secular society (which, among other things, means a society in which the renewal of community forms are necessary in the formation of acceptable/desirable realities) indicate that an appropriate evaluation of the reality of contemporary society is more complicated than what prevailing schemes suggest. For the purpose of our analysis it is important to warn that in a society where there is an irretrievable destroyed quality of life as well as ruined future developmental prospects and legitimacy of a community, and consequently solidarity, responsibility, and similar forms of behaviour, it is not possible to establish a reliable foundation for individual perspective. Consis-

tently, the revitalisation of the community and life individualisation (of youth) are two complementary parts – of the same process.

Recommendations offered by youth in this research regarding their quality of life improvements as well as the general style of essay writing illustrate a few useful insights. First of all, youth that live in areas of special state welfare do not constitute themselves as social participants on an egotistic basis; it is already evident that their aspirations for change with regard to the position of youth are considered in the context of an overall change in the area in which they live. The aspirational horizon of youths and the rootedness of their developmental ideas in simple depictions of public good show that they are the real producers of the new measures of developmental success in areas of special state welfare. Consequently, this shows that conventional approaches towards youth are inappropriate because they are primarily interested in the “prevention of negativity”. This type of approach disregards the possibility that young people can constitute themselves as actors of development with an array of their particular partner characteristics and advantages. In every community it is necessary to promote a culture of valuing, supporting and social inclusion of young people; this implies trust in their good side and talents as well as promoting opportunities that will allow youth better personal and social development. For changes in this direction it is not necessary to invest in extraordinary means or exceptional efforts. On the contrary, a new solidarity of Croatian society with its offspring is necessary.