



Bernadette Pirker & Marie-Theres Svoboda

Youth Information Officers and Leads for the Points4Action project at the LOGO! Association.

INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE AS A FOUNDATION FOR SOCIAL COHESION: THE *POINTS4ACTION* MODEL

1. Starting point: ageing, learning and intergenerational dialogue

Demographic change is one of the key challenges of the 21st century. Falling birth rates, rising life expectancy and increasingly differentiated stages of life are bringing about lasting changes to the structure of society. At the same time, more and more young people are looking for guidance, recognition and meaningful roles in the community. Their desire to get involved is clearly evident in their participation in voluntary work: in Austria, around 43% per cent of 15- to 24-year-olds are involved in charitable work [1] and, with an average of around seven hours per week, invest more time in voluntary activities than other age groups [2]. In a European comparison, the participation rate is slightly lower at around a quarter of young people, which is due on the one hand to differences between individual countries and on the other hand to differing definitions and methodological approaches in the surveys [3].

Active voluntary engagement is a cornerstone of democratic societies. Numerous social tasks and concerns would be impossible to manage without the willingness of people to volunteer their time and energy without pay. The fact that young people choose to do voluntary work is therefore of great importance for the future development of civil society [4]. Studies show that positive experiences of participation at a young age increase the

likelihood of volunteering in adulthood [5]. Furthermore, volunteering in youth has a lasting effect on political socialisation and social participation later in life [6].

At the same time, the growing proportion of older people in the population requires us to address new role models for ageing. While older generations have a wealth of experience and resources, younger generations bring new perspectives, questions and skills to the table. Social cohesion arises where these different experiences meet and are productively combined. Generations should not be understood as separate groups, but rather as being in a relationship of mutual learning and dependence.

These negotiation processes do not take place exclusively in urban centres, but also in local communities, in educational and leisure facilities, in civil society engagement and in people's immediate living environments. This is where social, demographic and cultural developments are particularly evident. At the same time, family networks are changing, living environments are becoming more pluralistic, and processes such as individualisation, digitalisation and social acceleration are making personal encounters more difficult. This makes encounters between generations less commonplace – even though they are of central importance for orientation, solidarity and mutual understanding.

These developments touch on fundamental democratic and human rights issues: How can social participation be made possible for people of all ages? How can social isolation and exclusion be prevented? And how can democracy remain tangible in everyday life through lived relationships, mutual recognition and responsibility for one another?

Against this backdrop, intergenerational dialogue plays a key role. It connects young and old, creates spaces for exchange, shared learning and engagement, and thereby strengthens social cohesion and democratic resilience. Projects such as *Points4Action* address precisely this issue by facilitating voluntary and self-determined encounters between generations and embedding them sustainably in social structures. As a long-established model of municipal human rights work, *Points4Action* makes social participation, dignity, recognition and solidarity tangible in everyday life. With an entry age of 13, the intergenerational project also offers a particularly low-threshold opportunity to enter intergenerational dialogue at an early stage.

2. What is Points4Action and what are the project's goals?

Points4Action is a cross-generational encounter project of the City of Graz, implemented by LOGO jugendmanagement, which was initiated in 2006. It is aimed at young people aged 13 to 18 and invites them to volunteer in senior citizens' facilities or multi-generational houses.

The focus is not on nursing activities, but on personal encounters: conversations, playing games together, reading aloud, going for walks, creative activities or providing support with everyday digital tasks.

The basic principle is deliberately designed to be low threshold. Young people can participate without any formal barriers and are prepared in a mandatory introductory workshop. In addition, young peers on site describe their personal impressions of their encounters with the senior citizens, and representatives of senior citizens' facilities give the "newcomers" their first insights into what goes on in the facilities. They then decide for themselves when, how often and in which facility they want to get involved. This self-determination is a central element of the project: involvement is not prescribed, but understood as a voluntary, meaningful activity.

A special feature of *Points4Action* is the recognition system. For every hour that young people spend in the facilities, they receive a so-called "point", documented by a forgery-proof self-adhesive sticker. These points function as a complementary currency for the common good and can be redeemed at regional partner businesses – such as cinemas, public swimming pools, bookshops, restaurants, sports facilities or driving schools. When selecting businesses, care is taken to ensure that their offerings contribute to the social and cultural participation of young people. Refinancing is provided by a municipal budget, which means that social participation is also supported economically and commitment is visibly recognised.

From a sociological perspective, this system is of particular importance. In modern societies, time, relationships and care are among those services that are socially indispensable but often invisible or undervalued. *Points4Action* deliberately sets a countersignal here: it translates social time into social recognition without commercialising it. The symbolic value of the points emphasises that commitment to other people has a legitimate place in the urban value system.

The project has multiple objectives:

- Reducing loneliness and social isolation among older people, especially in institutional settings.
- Strengthening the social and democratic skills of young people through practical experience of responsibility, empathy and self-efficacy.
- Promoting intergenerational dialogue as a basis for social cohesion.
- Contributing to human rights-oriented urban development in which dignity, participation and recognition are lived out in everyday life.

Historically, *Points4Action* arose from a clear socio-political motivation. The starting point in 2005 was the question of how humanity, closeness and emotional affection could be strengthened in old age in addition to professional care. A subsequent needs analysis in 26 senior citizens' facilities in Graz made it clear that many residents missed personal visits and wanted more contact and interaction with young people. These empirical findings formed the basis for the project concept, which was officially launched in 2006 after an intensive planning phase and has been expanded to other Styrian communities since 2020.

Since then, *Points4Action* has grown continuously, become more professional and adapted to social changes. Today, it is firmly anchored in Graz and is understood as a long-term social infrastructure – not as a temporary project.

3. Challenges in implementing intergenerational encounters

When talking about intergenerational encounters, it is also necessary to talk about various challenges. The *Points4Action* project responds to several key challenges in social coexistence. On the one hand, there is the social isolation of many older people, which is exacerbated by the loss of partners, friends or mobility. On the other hand, it addresses the limited opportunities for young people to experience themselves as socially effective outside of school or family. Young people often find themselves caught between the pressure to perform, the search for orientation and the lack of recognised roles in the community. The project brings together two groups that often have little natural contact with each other in everyday life.

However, bringing young people and older people together is not a conflict-free process per se. Different generations bring with them different communication styles, values, life experiences and media socialisation. While young people are often accustomed to fast, digital forms of communication, older people often have different rhythms, narrative styles and expectations of interpersonal interaction. These differences can create uncertainty, misunderstandings or initial reluctance on both sides.

In addition, there are specific challenges in senior citizens' facilities: encounters can be confronted with age-related limitations, dementia, illness, grief or biographically sensitive issues. For young people, who are often encountering such contexts for the first time, this can be emotionally demanding. At the same time, there is a risk that encounters will be exploited or overloaded with unrealistic expectations – for example, if young people are misunderstood as a "substitute" for professional care.

Points4Action addresses these challenges with a clear, multi-stage concept. The mandatory introductory workshop plays a central role, in which young people are not only informed about organisational matters, but also prepared in terms of content. Topics include respectful interaction with older people, awareness of age-related limitations, questions of closeness and distance, and one's own role in the project. This preparation creates security and promotes reflective thinking.

In addition, there is ongoing support from the project coordinators and designated contact persons at the facilities. They act as mediators, are available to answer questions and ensure that safety standards are maintained – for both young people and seniors. The facilities themselves are also involved in the process and prepared for the encounters. A key factor in the programme's success is the principle of voluntary participation among the young people. They themselves decide when and for how long they visit the senior citizens and how they want to engage with each other. This creates space for genuine relationships that can develop at their own pace. Sociologically speaking, diversity is understood not as a deficit but as a resource: the "friction" between different worlds becomes a learning environment for dialogue, tolerance and mutual recognition – key democratic skills.

Last but not least, the pandemic phase from 2020 to 2022 also presented a particular challenge. *Points4Action* responded flexibly with low-contact and digital formats such as balcony and window conversations, letters, and telephone and video calls. This adaptability shows that the project is not bound to rigid forms but can maintain its basic idea – relationship and attention – even under changed conditions.

4. Added value and impact: social, democratic and human rights dimensions

The success of *Points4Action* cannot be measured solely by quantitative indicators, even if these demonstrate the reach and stability of the project. Since 2006, around 60.000 hours of voluntary work by approximately 3.000 young people have been documented, a significant proportion of whom remain active over a longer period. This continuity can be interpreted as an indication of the subjective perceived meaningfulness and attractiveness of the programme. An empirical study on the experiences of the participating young people also shows that the extrinsic incentive of the points system loses importance during the engagement and primarily serves as an entry point. In contrast, intergenerational exchange is becoming increasingly important. Learning from the experiences of older people and gaining new perspectives on social issues are cited by young people as key motivating factors for long-term engagement in *Points4Action* [7].

To understand why young people remain committed to the project in the long term and why the encounters are experienced as meaningful for both sides, it is worth taking a closer look at the individual effects of the programme. On a personal level, *Points4Action* has lasting social, emotional and societal effects for both the participating senior citizens and the young people, which are presented below separately for the two target groups.

In the *Points4Action* project, the focus for older people is less on the number of contacts and more on their quality. Institutions report stable, trusting relationships between senior citizens and young people, which contribute to a noticeable reduction in loneliness and a significant revitalisation of everyday life. The regular visits give many older people a sense of recognition, belonging and the feeling that they are still an active part of urban society. Their biographies, experiences and perspectives are heard and appreciated – a central aspect of dignified ageing.

The continuous exchange with young people also has a positive effect on the physical and mental fitness of the senior citizens. They experience themselves not only as recipients of support, but as relevant, valued members of society. As a visiting programme, *Points4Action* thus makes an important contribution to reducing social isolation and improving the quality of life of older people. At the same time, the project supports the participating institutions in designing leisure activities. This relieves the burden on care staff, creates additional social stimuli in everyday life and promotes an overall positive atmosphere within the institutions.

Points4Action also has a lasting individual impact on young people. Through their involvement, they experience self-efficacy and social recognition, develop social, communicative and intergenerational skills, and take responsibility for other people. Democracy is not taught theoretically but is made tangible in everyday life – as a practice of respect, shared responsibility and solidarity.

The project also promotes inclusion and diversity: young people from different social, cultural and family backgrounds are equally involved. The regular meetings help to break down prejudices and strengthen intercultural understanding – not through instruction, but through shared experiences and everyday life.

Active participation strengthens social skills such as empathy, consideration, sensitivity and tolerance. By organising their involvement independently, the young people also develop reliability, personal responsibility and self-confidence. The experience they gain is valuable for their personal development and their future (professional) lives.

Through exchanges with older people, young people learn that their lives and perspectives are interesting and taken seriously. This encourages them to confidently develop their own role within society. At the same time, they broaden their horizons by learning about different perspectives on social developments and benefiting from the wealth of experience of senior citizens. This also strengthens their decision-making and problem-solving skills.

Encounters between young and old break down reservations, prejudices and generational barriers. A process of mutual appreciation and learning from one another emerges, which brings about lasting changes in the perspectives of both generations. The meetings are characterised by openness, acceptance and respect – and it is not uncommon for new, cross-generational friendships to develop as a result.

The impact of *Points4Action* also extends beyond individual experiences and learning processes, with lasting effects at a structural level. The intergenerational project format deliberately opens participating senior citizens' facilities to young people, turning them into places of civil society encounter. At the same time, the city takes responsibility by providing financial security and institutional support for the project. This sends a clear signal: social cohesion and the preservation of human dignity are public tasks.

Points4Action thus goes far beyond the function of a pure participation project. As a model of democratic community development, it creates spaces for encounter, strengthens social cohesion and enables young people to play an active, tangible role in the community. Against the backdrop of global challenges such as demographic change, social fragmentation and political polarisation, the involvement of young people is particularly important. Projects such as *Points4Action* make a significant contribution by encouraging young people to help shape a society based on solidarity and inclusion, thus taking an important step towards a participatory and socially just future.

Footnotes

[1] Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection (BMSGPK), 3. *Bericht zum freiwilligen Engagement in Österreich – Freiwilligenbericht 2019* (Vienna: BMSGPK, 2019), 17.

[2] *Ibid.*, 24.

[3] European Economic and Social Committee, *Volunteers – Citizens Building the Future of Europe*, Opinion SOC/688, CES/2021-03078-EN (Brussels, 2021).

[4] Wolfgang Dux, "Zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement," in *Kompendium Kinder- und Jugendhilfe*, ed. Karin Böllert (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018).

[5] Wolfgang Dux and Elke Sass, "Kompetenzerwerb Jugendlicher durch ein freiwilliges Engagement (Skills Acquisition by Young People through Voluntary Engagement)," *ZEP: Journal for International Educational Research and Development Education* 30, no. 4 (2007), 40.

[6] *Ibid.*, 20.

[7] Helena Schunko, *Young People in the Community: Young People and Their Experiences with the Points4Action Programme* (Master's thesis, University of Graz, 2018), 102-104.