

# 3rd European Youth Work Convention

## BONN, December

### Workshop 4

Dr. Guy Redig, Belgium

#### Context

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Youth work in its various forms, dimensions and disciplines plays increasingly a crucial role in European youth strategies. However, there is still a need to foster youth work in such an essential role. The workshop will deal with the question of how the use of existing instruments can be stimulated. It needs to be discussed which elements and principles are needed to ensure the further development and sustainable and impactful support of youth work.

This introduction is about the essentials of a modern European Youth Policy, which are sustainable, long-lasting and impactful and which put youth work in the core of its priorities. Which role(s) should youth work have in this respect?

#### Introduction. Hurray!

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Let's be honest. The European policymakers (EU and CoE) positioned themselves with conviction in the wide and open landscape of international youth policy and youth work. Nobody can and shall deny this evolution. After decades of nearly complete absence, both actors invested with some audace and enthusiasm in this field. The pressure to do so, came bottom up and by choices of the highest international powers.

In fact, some member states kept on begging for more commitment; they needed a wider and surely a European framework to reflect on their own youth policy and to place their kind of youth work in a juxta position to similar practices in other countries. At the same time the overwhelming economic ratio created a shocking negligence of (young) citizens for a common Europe. European top politicians feared to lose connection with oncoming generations. For young people, the common project of the EU made them feel indifferent ... sometime even dismissive.

Although the EU and the Council of Europe are difficult to compare, this evolution seems synchronic. The EU created an increasing important packet of measures. Most of them to stimulate mobility between young people all over the continent (Erasmus, EVS and de European Solidarity corps). The CoE invested in enabling democratic values and networking of different partners. Both actors structured themselves. The EU created a strong and powerful administration, committed and open for dialogue (thx. Floor Van Houdt). One of the most influential and adequate actor on this field is the Youth Partnership, where EU and CoE created a mutual knowledge center. This partnership acts in different dimensions. Building a serial of youth (work) history stories (of all European countries), managing of a network of youth academics, organizing conferences on very diverse topics (thx. Tanja Basarab). The partnership offers opportunities to look out for common ground defining difficult notions like youth work and youth policies. The national agencies, spread all over Europe, wove a tied network on the implementation of the program's and identified themselves as engines for more and better youth work and youth policy. The work on the grass roots, they seduce and support thousands of young people to explore their broad international environment.

Reflecting on the recent decades, we have to conclude positive, with admiration for the endurance and the sometimes stubborn efforts of many youth (work) actors to bring both EU and CoE in al youthful mood, creating concrete and intelligent opportunities for local, national and international players.

## An international vision on youth and youth work

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### The EU: youth as an instrument for employability and weapon against all kind of menaces

No government policy without a basic vision, a solid ground for norms and values. In case of youth policy, these must be a basis to construct measures and structures. Analyzing the EU, for a (too) long time, the one and only logic was the economical, let's call it without Marxist dogmatics, the supremacy of capitalism. The EU seemed for many years paralyzed by the market. All efforts were made to improve a successful and extremely free market. If youth was mentioned, it was purely to increase their value as servants of the economy. The fight against a dysfunctional system was simple: make them more competent, flexible young employees. No youth policy without the central mantra of "increase the employability". Member states were stimulated to reform education, emphasizing on a quick and suitable utility for all sorts of companies and industries. Youth policy was limited to these goals. There was no attention for youth and youth work, without the strong emphasis on competences... even the most pleasant practices (as youth work ought to be...) were colonized by these mantras.

A short while later, under the pressure of terrorist attacks, a new slogan developed: anti radicalization. Youth policy (and youth work) became tools to fight against all odds, especially the menace of religious violence. Special programs, conferences, experts. A real charade of prophets with wonder pills to avoid problems with bally youngsters. Money for nothing and ...

Nearly everyone with some common sense could foresee the ridicule and protuberance effects of these choices.

### The Council of Europe

Of course, the CoE cannot dispose of the competences and means of the EU. The essence of the CoE is defined by three pillars: human rights, democracy and state of law. The approach, also on youth, is more free and gives natural opportunities to focus on different aspects of living together. Often the CoE, with a far more positive approach, gave the EU inspiration. The two European youth centers offered literally space to find each other.

On the other hand, the CoE-essences limit the impact. A lot of good ideas stay without real obligations. Some of the members are really not suitable in the high profile of democratic, free and tolerant rules... although the basics of the CoE. The talking is far from compatible with the acting of (increasingly) more members. (This phenomenon appears alarming in the EU, with Poland and Hungary as protagonists). The CoE is based on intergovernmental cooperation... no progress without complete consensus.

Nevertheless, the CoE gave space to a more open and less pinching view on youth and youth work.

### The end of a defensive and pessimistic domination?

Although the international dreams suffer from hard attacks (Brexit, the democratic deficit in some member states, the lack of a common policy on Covid and immigration), on the field of youth policy and youth work, some optimism seems justified.

A close observer can make some hopeful conclusions. The hegemony of the free market, the one dimensioned approach of utility and employability were pushed away to the back room. Instead, young people regained their hopeful profile. Optimism, the belief in the power and abilities of children and youngsters, popped up. Finally, at last but not at least.

The adagio of strength, creativity and hope became the leading paradigm. This is so much more than a detail: it will (must, shall) influence the whole of youth policy and youth work. The international efforts will be based on these new inspiration... although the old demons of a defensive and pessimistic approach are still around and dangerous. They stay eager to instrumentalize youth policy and surely youth work to avoid or neutralize problems... especially problems for the market, not for young people themselves.

## Youth work. In search for a common ground

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### Youth work: a small but relevant part of youth policy

Youth work, comparing to education or social policies, is a modest, small but very specific part of a broad youth policy. Youth policy means the whole of explicit efforts of a government towards youth. On the wide scale of youth interventions and youth-directed systems, youth work must be situated on the most free, playful and autonomous end. Youth work offers young people space to be young together, to organize themselves and to set out their own goals and priorities. It is still and very clearly an educational (pedagogical) approach, although in many practices they are ruled by young people. The voluntary and paid youth workers are fundamentally different from teachers of welfare workers. The essence of youth work can be described as an ideological model where young people can define their own ideologies, in a real autonomous space (literally and figuratively).

### Position of youth work in an ideological frame: towards a pluralistic mode<sup>1</sup>

A lot of European countries share a mutual recognizable history on youth work... surely until the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After WW 2, the continent splintered and diverged. The iron curtain, the golden sixties and welfare state in Western and Nordic Europe, the turbulences with surviving dictators in South-Europe... caused a very diverse development of youth work.

Nevertheless, the history of youth work shows a lot of ideological manipulation. With some exceptions, in the early beginning of youth work was primarily an instrument of ideological and political movements. Through youth work, they invested in children and youngsters, to guide them in a lifelong loyalty.

The more recent history makes it nearly impossible to find a common ground. In a very “prudent” way, one could distinct a difference between traditional catholic or protestant dominated countries. There is surely an Anglo-Saxon model (also in the Netherlands and parts of the Nordic part), anchored on open youth centers with paid youth workers. On the other hand, some countries still work with a predominant voluntary model, where young volunteers oversee local youth organizations (movements, clubs, playground associations etc.) In formal “communist” countries, the civil society still struggles with inventing an own model. In short: any attempt to find a common definition seems idle.

The efforts of the Youth Work conventions and initiatives such as the EU/CoE partnership are strongly influencing a process to more mutual knowledge and understanding. One of the remarkable observations is the strengthening conviction on the necessity of a pluralistic model. This model is opposite to a more corporatist approach. The pluralism aims an environment with a rich variety of youth initiatives and organizations. They cluster themselves in a packet of common values, but they can be very diverse in the way they present themselves. On the contrary, the corporatist approach obliges a very narrow model, strongly influenced, even shaped by government. This strong influence tries to set a narrow common ideological identity (left or right wing inspired): there is a top-down decision on the way youth work takes positions on ideological matters.

Some critics assume that a choice for a pluralistic approach, causes indifference and relativism. It refers to a well spread complaint: young people do not care anymore of morals, norms, and values. Their focus is limited to their own little worlds. Their engagement ends with enjoying their own lives. Such a negativism is wrong. It gives youth a bad name.. Just look around, observe how most of the changes are initiated by young people. How their engagements and creativity regain power, generation after generation.

In the pluralist model, youth work gives plenty of “space”, so young people can create his own ideological frame. In fact, the ideology of youth work is creating opportunities and offers coaching to

youth to construct own ideological choices. Therefore, the believe in the power and responsibility of young people is crucial. Youth work invests in capacities, enables emancipation. Youth work contributes to more active democracy, makes young people co-owners... also in society. But youth workers must be aware of their accountability.

### Recognition of youth work... are we the jolly beggarmen?

Often, youth work struggles with a shortage of recognition. Recognition means both respect and support from governments. It is difficult to deny this problem. Youth work as a social-profit phenomenon cannot flourish without a solid support. Luckily, a lot European countries offers a well-balanced policy of subsidies and other forms of support. But not everywhere.

In this context appears the aspect of identity. If youth work cannot show a recognizable “photo”, it is nearly impossible to find a structural niche in a government policy frame: who are we, what are we doing, why, where, how many... These questions demands surely good narratives, telling about successful practices and a lot of exploring of different youth work initiatives, especially on the grass root level.

On the other hand: how far must, can youth work bow his head, in a humble gesture demanding money? We all feel the creeping in of the ultra-liberalism, sneaking in through the back door (sometimes the front door) and dominated a utilitarian logic. Youth work must prove its usefulness, on a field where economic profit rule. There is no doubt about the many contributions of youth work... if you want to see them. If we are obliged to give proof in a classical economic dimension, we will not succeed. Although we are tempted to prove ourselves by telling stories of increasing employability, anti-radicalization, banning drugs, integrating difficult youngsters etc. Of course, youth work contributes strongly to a better wellbeing... but those are collateral profits, not the essences of offering young people space to be young together, to create their own ideologies, to enjoy play and live. European youth policy must prioritize on these processes towards more common ground.

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### Youth and reproduction of systems

It is a fact: poverty, exclusion and racism are expanding. The gap between excluded and included citizens widens. Especially children and young people are vulnerable. The reproduction-factor increases; so more and more young people grow up in threatening circumstances. This evolution is clear, even in traditional “rich” countries.

How must youth policy response? For argument sake, it can be good to create deliberately a dichotomy, a firm contradiction: (1) should governments focus all efforts on the 20% youth at risk or (2) is it more important to invest in the 80% on the majority relatively living in good conditions? This dichotomy seems easy to solve because you must divide government policies on both aspects. But... sometimes youth policy and youth work are reduced to problem solving, to heal and repair. For politicians and administrations, it sounds completely relevant and legitime to emphasize on tackling the problems. This approach gives a logical and particularly useful answer.

But is that so? Why healing, repairing, and working on re-integration if there is nothing to integrate? If policies forgot about het majority of “successful” young people and youth work (most of the time voluntary), the landscape becomes a desert. The richness of youth organizations declines. The possibilities for young people to organize themselves shrink... shrinking space for youth work.

Therefore, a strong plea for a youth(work) policy that invests with priority in the good shape of a variety of youth work practices. Only the durable existence of a rich offer of youth work initiatives (cf. pluralism) makes an approach on healing and repairing efficient. It is a clear and present danger for youth work policy to forget about the emblematic 80% and to create an “apartheid” for a defensive approach. Youth policy and youth work must be conscious about this trap, this tempting pitfall.

### Youth work: a self-critical reflex

In a self-critical reflex, youth work – especially the strong structured and well embedded players, have to admit that it is extremely difficult for a lot of tantalizing and sometimes low professional newcomers, to find a good chair on the youth work table. Often, the seats are completely divided, there is no free space anymore. The “cake” of subsidies and support from governments is always limited. The more players, the smaller the piece.

Of course, it is easy to understand. Everybody defends his own (perceived) rights, nobody likes to lose grants. This mechanism has perfidious effects: ongoing conservatism, a brake on renewal, disillusion for new initiatives. Governments must make choices, but often fear the hard reactions of well embedded organizations. Most of the time, these “well established” (is not the same as traditional) structures are experienced in lobbying and had plenty of time to specialize in tackling governments. We can and must hope that this threatening system does not goes on... demanding self-critical courage.

### To conclude

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No European youth policy without a clear, strong vision on the position of young people in our European societies. Governments must build this policy on an offensive, optimistic approach, believing in the strength and creativity. This is the best fundament to construct a more healing, remediating policy to tackle successful and sustainable the increasing severe problems such as poverty, social exclusion and racism. Those two tracks need a simultaneous efforts, they cannot be develop on their own.

Youth work will be a specific, highly relevant part of that broad policy. Therefore it must be approached with respect for its unique selling identity: playfulness, autonomy and trust in the self-organizing power, the commitment of young volunteer and paid youth workers. This youth work policy needs a pluralistic framework, where diversity rules. Therefore youth work needs more common ground, chances to identify itself. The process doing that is as important as the result.

Dr. Guy Redig  
Belgium

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<sup>1</sup> Elements of this part of the introduction are based on a report I made on the 3th Offenburg Talks, November 2020