



## **POLICY PAPER**

# **YOUTH WORK IN THE EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM AND YOUTH ORGANISATIONS**

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## **Background**

Through this policy paper, the European Youth Forum (YFJ) aims to outline more clearly its understanding of youth work. It also looks at what is the role of the Youth Forum and what actions we should take in this area. Furthermore, it aims to foster political action by other stakeholders in the field, especially institutional actors, towards creating an environment where youth work is nurtured and promoted.

This paper highlights what youth work means for the European Youth Forum – youth work has a strong link with non-formal education (NFE), since most of our members use NFE when conducting youth work activities. There are many stakeholders involved in the provision of youth work. Youth workers may be paid or volunteers, and in addition there are many other roles in the youth work sector. The paper also highlights that youth work has a positive impact on our society and on the individual and its purpose is to build empowered young individuals that actively contribute to our society. Through this paper the Forum wants to spark a debate about the necessity of the youth sector as a whole becoming stronger at advocating for its own agenda, the agenda of the young people they work with, visions for society, and the importance of youth work in any healthy democracy.

Youth organisations have to continue building capacities and common understanding of how the youth sector can become stronger through a strategic approach to organisational development, and collectively push a youth agenda on a local, regional, national and European level. To achieve this the work in building strong youth organisations should be more comprehensive – proving the value of youth work and youth organisations should go hand in hand with calling for support, recognition and funding. Quality youth work has been discussed greatly in the youth sector for a number of years<sup>1</sup>. With this policy paper, the European Youth Forum seeks to contribute by showing its strong vision on how to make youth work more impactful.

Core topics are the impact of youth work on the individual and the society, how the Youth Forum should advocate for the recognition of youth work and finally how it should advocate for increased support and funding for youth organisations.

## **Introduction**

There are different understandings of youth work especially when analysing the definitions on a national level<sup>2</sup>. The paper approaches this by providing some guiding principles of quality youth work:

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<sup>1</sup> See Helmut Fennes and Hendrik Otten, Quality in non-formal education and training in the field of European youth work, Salto-Youth Training and Cooperation Resource Center. (<https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-1615/TrainingQualityandCompetenceStudy.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2014). Working with young people: The value of youth work in the EU ([http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/study/youth-work-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf))

- Centred around young people and based on young people's rights, abilities, interests and needs;
- Relationship based – focusing on interaction and activities planned with others;
- Empowering young people and engaging them as partners;
- Positive personal & social impact;
- Voluntary and meaningful participation;
- A non formal educative and informal learning process;
- Engaging and fun in its approach and methodology.

The diversity of youth work, especially in terms of sectorial, organisational and thematic approaches allows every young person to find their way towards youth work. Young people can be both practitioners and beneficiaries.

In the framework of the European Youth Forum and its member organisations, Youth work is understood as: actions, activities, processes and projects, undertaken by, with or for youth with the aim of providing a space for young people, for their personal development and for their needs. It further aims to improve the social, political, economic and ecological status of young people, to enhance their skills and social networks, and to increase the level of their representation and active participation or build their capacity to undertake such actions. Youth work does this effectively by combining the twin processes of education and participation. It aims to improve the status of a sensitive element of society and subsequently takes part in the construction of civil society; therefore it should be considered a public good, which is not an area for profit making, and should be treated as such by the corresponding authorities.<sup>3</sup>

Youth work and non-formal education (NFE) are inherently linked when happening in youth organisations in particular. Youth work often uses non-formal education as a methodology when conducting its activities. In addition, most of youth organisations provide non-formal education programmes for its beneficiaries. However, not only youth organisations use NFE.

The situation for young people today is considered precarious and one where uncertainty prevails. We strongly believe that young people must be seen as active social actors to improve the future and that youth work can be a driver for social inclusion and contribute to negating some of the harmful aspects faced by youth today<sup>4</sup>.

## 1. Youth Work and the Individual

The individual development is paramount to youth work and furthermore, the empowerment of the individual is the first step to creating a society composed of

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<sup>3</sup> 0367-10 European Youth Forum Position Paper on the current status and perspectives of European Youth Work & Policy on Youth Work

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2014). Working with young people: The value of youth work in the EU ([http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/study/youth-work-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf))

active and participatory citizens.

Youth work is engaging, fun and should be embarked on out of voluntary motivations and free will. Different interactive methodologies, for example games, which provide a way to learn through fun and joy, are a great medium to educate values, invite peers to take action, discover the environment, learn to know and respect each other, etc. Youth work is however more than fun activities, it starts where the young people are at, it provides the space for building interactions, friendships, peer-learning, developing young people's competences, discovering one's capacities and contribute strongly to the physical and emotional well-being of citizens, stimulating solidarity and engagement; outcomes which are often underestimated.

### **1.1. Empowering youth towards active citizenship**

Quality youth work bridges a gap between childhood and adulthood by engaging young people in activities that contribute to their development, whilst still providing space for learning through an appealing way. Youth work can provide a space where a healthy and quality transition is ensured.

Youth has always found itself in a particular role of not being adults, nor being children. Youth work puts young people at the centre of the activities, which unquestionably leads to self-development. It also puts young people in charge of development of an activity where they are responsible for the planning, execution and follow up of the activities, thus building self-esteem, confidence and empowering young people. Youth work encourages young people to take on responsibilities, often seen as being part of adult life, while at the same time it often uses engaging and recreation-based ways of interaction and learning; effectively building a bridge between adult life and childhood. While partaking in youth work, young people increase their ability to engage and be heard in society.

Through experiential learning processes, young people also get a chance to reflect and discuss about the global issues affecting today's world. This stimulates young people to think about themselves not only as individuals, but also as part of communities, and the wider society. Critical thinking, common responsibility and solidarity are values nurtured through the learning activities youth work provides.

### **1.2. Competences gained**

Young people face many challenges and are presented with many opportunities. Soft skills, such as the ability to learn, be creative, take initiative and be able to adapt are necessary.

Youth work does not solely aim to build skills and competencies of young people, however young people engaged in youth work gain them through the process that is valuable for their personal development as well as their participation in professional and societal life. It should be complementary to formal education and within the life long learning perspective.

Often youth work provides the first opportunity for young people to be responsible for an activity and develop a real understanding of what it is like to have ownership of the process. The more engaging the activity, the more ownership is developed. Once an activity is concluded, young people will undeniably be empowered on an individual level.

Youth work develops teamwork competences, since it is inherently developed and executed in a group. This in itself is a crucial attribute for an individual to be well-functioning in any community: whether that is in the work-place, at school, university or in youth organisations. Decision-making is another important competence gained through youth work, whether that in unison with others, or linked to learning to take individual responsibility for the decisions made<sup>5</sup>.

Youth work is an activity where each young person is given the space to find themselves – they learn by doing. Empowering them to participate fully in society and building up competences that are important for the rest of their lives.

Youth organisations contribute to the development of communication, organisational and planning skills, and raise young people's confidence and autonomy. The higher the involvement of young people in youth organisations, the higher the development of the particular skills set. Beyond competences development, involvement in youth organisations provides young people with the opportunity to create networks and connections, which can be particularly beneficial for those that previously had limited social capital<sup>6</sup>.

### **1.3 Diversity and outreach**

Youth work must start with the individual, and recognise that young people are very diverse. Young people come from a range of different backgrounds, social groups, ages and intersectionalities. Effective youth work caters for the individual's needs on a personalised basis.

Special attention should be paid to young people who are disadvantaged and made vulnerable who come from marginalised groups in society.

Many young people can be reached through detachment and outreach youth

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<sup>5</sup> Cross, J. (2006) *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways That Inspire Innovation and Performance*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc

<sup>6</sup> The study "The Impact of Non-formal Education in youth organisations on young people's employability", commissioned by the European Youth Forum to the University of Bath/GHK Consulting, [http://issuu.com/yomag/docs/reportnfe\\_print](http://issuu.com/yomag/docs/reportnfe_print)

By planning and executing the activities, involved parties gain core organisational and coordination competences needed for adult life, for example through organising activities young people acquire skills related to conceptualisation, planning, execution and, finally, evaluation, as well as ensuring sufficient resources and budgeting for all these phases.

Two attributes gained through youth work are linked: communication and pedagogical skills. When designing an activity the youth worker needs to think about how to effectively communicate the messages and how to shape the process of learning, especially in terms of defining a timeframe, setting learning objectives and self-assessment as essential elements of good youth work.

The findings of the study demonstrate clear and tangible impact of non-formal education provided by youth organisations on the employability of young people; the five competences above-mentioned are among the top six skills most demanded by employers.

work.

Youth work must essentially be about improving the lives of young people whether it is through improving competences, wellbeing or empowerment.

## 2. Youth Work and the Community

Youth work contributes towards social inclusion and wellbeing of young people, by putting active citizenship at its core. Young people engaged in youth work gain social responsibility awareness by learning how actions of individuals and their groups affect the surrounding community and society at all levels.

### **2.1. Impact on society**

Youth work plays a distinctive role in empowering young people to take an active role in their communities. It touches upon areas of education, training, employment, health, culture, sport and other elements, thus ensuring a broad scope of societal outreach.

While youth work and youth organisations have no role in replacing basic public services such as education, health or social services, youth organisations together with these services should strive to work together, it provides young people with the drive, the skills and the enthusiasm to take initiatives and bring on their own solutions to societal challenges.

Inclusiveness, as one of youth work's values, paves the way for changing the wider society's views and approach to young people. Whilst contributing to active citizenship, it positively affects greater understanding, fosters intercultural learning, counters intolerance, xenophobia, and negative images that young people are often subjected to, especially in cases of marginalized groups of young people<sup>7</sup>.

Youth participation in political and civic processes is under scrutiny: many European countries are facing lower voter turnout, which in turn is undermining the democratic process. Active participation and active citizenship are central to healthy democracies. Youth work creates an environment where individuals are encouraged to find answers to their most pressing societal questions and to realize that communities and societies are more than the immediate circle of family or friends.

By engaging in democratic youth organisations, young people learn key aspects of democratic participation. Involvement in Youth organisations is often a first insight into collective decision-making and division of power. Youth organisations 's engagement provides individuals and groups with a necessary set of skills and attitudes, leading to a healthier democracy and more peaceful society. Youth organisations that are engaged in quality youth work are essential to build social capital in a community. Youth work enables young people to meet, discuss and

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National Youth Council of Ireland (2012). *Assessment of the Economic Value of Youth Work* ([http://www.youth.ie/sites/youth.ie/files/Economic\\_Benefit\\_Youthwork\\_2012.pdf](http://www.youth.ie/sites/youth.ie/files/Economic_Benefit_Youthwork_2012.pdf))

do activities together; which increases the trust between young people both through bonding and bridging different groups of young people.

As mentioned youth work provides the beneficiaries the opportunities to develop attitudes and skills that push the values within society to a higher ethical and moral level. These gained qualities are not only relevant for the individual, but also highly relevant for the effective functioning of both private and public sectors.

Further integration of youth work with other youth policy areas, through cooperation and knowledge sharing, through research, practice and policy, would provide more tangible evidence on the impact of youth work in different areas.

## **2.2. Recognition of youth work**

The youth sector has focused its attention in many cases towards seeking political, educational and societal recognition of youth work; throughout this process many have questioned the value youth work brings. Therefore it is paramount that the youth sector concentrates on showing the previously mentioned benefits and the impact of youth work. It should adopt an evidence-based approach in targeting relevant actors.

The emphasis on the impact of youth work on the individual and societal levels should be strengthened; the debate should not only focus on *demanding* recognition but also *proving* worth. It is only through proving to the wider society that youth work is beneficial that increased recognition can be achieved.

The European Youth Forum therefore proposes a shift in the debate on the recognition: bottom-up, rather than a top-down approach. If a youth worker understands and thereby recognises the skills gained through a youth work activity, they are more likely to be able to advocate for these gained skills. Whether that is to an employer, a political actor or a family member, understanding of what they have learnt from engaging in youth work is key.

Unfortunately, many practitioners and beneficiaries do not realise that they are engaged in youth work, nor do they recognize the skills they gain from it. The youth sector should become better at explaining this aspect; since if building a common understanding of these elements on a grass-root level is successful, its value is much more likely to be recognized by other societal actors.

Using a bottom-up approach to recognition aims at creating thousands of advocates who themselves are multipliers. Self-recognition of the added value to society as well as the individual is the very first step towards increased recognition and the Youth Forum will be giving this element an increased priority.

Therefore, there should be a stronger focus on the societal and individual impact of youth work through youth organisations. Through promoting these findings, youth work will receive a greater attention in the public space.

### **2.3. Actors in the youth work field**

There are several actors in the youth work field each with a different level of involvement. The key actors are the youth organisations, the youth workers or practitioners, the beneficiaries and policy makers. A broader scope encompasses other actors such as the parents, the researchers, the community leaders, education providers and other stakeholders.

The Youth Forum needs to cooperate and interact with them when relevant in order to mutualise and create synergies towards proving the recognition of youth work and the value of youth organisations. Attention should also be paid to other organisations and institutions that work with young people and seek to support their development.

### **2.4 Improving Communities through Youth Work**

Youth work can improve communities through promoting community cohesion, providing safe places for young people, acting as a point of call for ensuring the safeguarding of young people and helping to ease social tensions.

With young people often being demonised by the media, youth work can act as a way of combating negative stereotypes of young people and informing the wider community of the positive contributions young people make towards society.

By providing services for young people that improve their wellbeing, attainment and making a generally positive contribution to society.

## **3. Quality youth work: the European Youth Forum perspective**

The Youth Forum aims to be the bridge, at the European level, that brings the knowledge and expertise about youth work from the grassroots level and advocates for policy changes based on this expertise. Strong youth organisations can demonstrate clearly their added value to society.

### **3.1. Building strong youth organisations in Europe: European Youth Forum's approach**

The Youth Forum adopts both a pro-active and reactive strategy when it comes to working with members and future members.

#### *Pro-active*

The Youth Forum will proactively seek to investigate the situation of youth organisations in Europe. It will do this mainly through study visits to countries and organisations in order to gain an understanding of their needs and the context in which they operate. It is only through a well-researched and well-understood analysis of the situation of youth organisations that the Youth Forum can become a relevant actor that can assist in capacity building. Measures such as analysis of youth strategies and similar help to build an accurate understanding of the conditions that shape youth work across Europe.

#### *Re-active*

Core to any organisations development, is an understanding of the need for



advancing towards being more effective. If the need is not understood, there is very little that can be done in terms of giving support. The re-active approach stresses that organisations should always make a needs assessment, based on a consultative process with key actors (staff, board and member organisations) before the Youth Forum engages in capacity building. The Youth Forum will never engage in capacity building efforts if the need is not understood and clearly expressed. In the same spirit the Forum does not establish organisations, nor is it a core actor in their development. However, the accumulated years of experience in the field, and drawing on these experiences enables the Forum to support such processes.

### **3.2. Nurturing learning within member organisations**

Core to the Forum's work as an umbrella organisation is to facilitate and foster increased cooperation and interchanges between the non-governmental organisations in the youth sector. Fostering exchanges between organisations is fundamental to how stronger youth organisations in Europe are built. The Youth Forum, through gaining insight into what their reality is, can develop strategies and tools to make these organisations even stronger.

### **3.3. Quality Youth Work Capacity building: a process**

Over the years, the European Youth Forum has adopted a strategic approach to quality youth work capacity building. The Forum has developed key competences and experiences which has frame its capacity building efforts into three main areas: strategic planning, policy development and advocacy

Youth Forum members are all umbrella organisations which means that when the Youth Forum provides capacity building support, this element has to be taken into account. Any umbrella organisation has two main functions, to provide a space where its members can learn from each other experiences and to advocate for the collective interest of their members.

All of the areas above require that the youth organisation actively engages with its membership and thereby strengthening its position as the voice of youth in their community.

As a platform representing youth organisations, the Youth Forum and its member organisations gain their strength and capacity to advocate only if they fully engage with their membership. If these relationships with members are not constantly developed and fostered, any umbrella organisation becomes an empty shell. Encouraging engagement is therefore paramount to the Youth Forum's capacity building efforts.

The European Youth Forum's Youth Work Capacity Building process has three distinct steps. Improving any umbrella organisation's well-functioning starts with strategic planning. Only through direct consultation with member organisations are umbrella organisations given a mandate to work on a subject. Besides, it is when knowing their reality and also their vision of society that an umbrella organisation can advocate for their collective interest.

The second step is the policy development in light of what the organisation wants to change on a societal level. These policies should also be developed in close cooperation and consultation with the member organisations. By developing policies, an organisation has to ensure that there is consensus and a common understanding of a particular challenge. This makes the umbrella organisation relevant for its members.

In the third step the Youth Forum will train on how to effectively advocate on issues faced by the organisations. The training aims to give an insight on how to affect political decisions taken on behalf of stakeholders. Any advocacy process requires an understanding of the political processes and thereafter the development of a strategy for how to best reach ones goals.

The European Youth Forum also supports in the same way non-established national youth councils. The Youth Forum provides a space where youth organisations at a national level can develop a common vision towards establishing a platform uniting them all under one umbrella.

To achieve an efficient quality youth work capacity building, youth organisations need also to be pro-active and re-active in order to ensure a comprehensive approach and an effective long-term strategy.