

STUDY ON THE

SOCIAL VALUE

OF YOUTH

ORGANISATIONS

Summary



european
youth forum

Editorial team

This study has been commissioned by the European Youth Forum to People and Work Unit (Loudoun – Buteown, Cardiff - CF10 5HW, <http://www.peopleandworkunit.org.uk/>)

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Introduction

The European Youth Forum is the platform for youth organisations in Europe. The Youth Forum is committed to advocating towards the recognition of the values and the contribution made by youth organisations to the wellbeing of our society and commissioned this study to collect evidence on the value that youth organisations bring to the social development of young individuals, communities and societies through youth work and youth participation.

The study is based primarily upon a systematic literature review, including a review of academic studies, independent evaluations and organisations' own reports, complemented by a small number of interviews with representatives of the sector. Full details on the literature reviewed are included in the full report.

The study focuses upon:

- The ways in which youth organisations create social value, highlighting five key “mechanisms” through which they do so;
- the types of social value youth organisations create, outlining the personal, social, civic and political outcomes associated with youth organisations; and
- the quality of data on outcomes and impact and ways in which this could be improved.

Mechanisms:

How youth organisations create social value?

The ways in which youth organisations create social value ('mechanisms') are well-understood and documented. The report focuses upon five overlapping and complementary mechanisms:

- Youth participation;
- youth work and formal, non formal and informal education;
- experiences and opportunities (e.g. to travel);
- places and spaces for young people to meet and form social relationships; and
- information, advice and guidance.

By offering these, youth organisations:

- Enable young people to do – to experience and to learn – things they would otherwise not be able to; and
- influence young people's thinking and behaviour by, for example, socialising young people - so they "fit into" society – and/or raise their consciousness – so they can challenge ideas and structures.

The consequent changes in young people's skills, knowledge, thinking and behaviour contributes to a range of personal, social, civic and political outcomes.

Outcomes:

Personal and social, civic and political

The outcomes associated with young people's involvement in youth organisations are also well documented in the literature. The report focuses upon two broad types of outcome:

- Personal and social outcomes; and
- civic and political outcomes.

Personal and social outcomes

Personal outcomes include increases in human capital (most notably strengthening of a range of social and emotional skills and dispositions) and social capital, and also including: positive changes in young people's attitudes, thinking and behaviour (such as more positive attitudes toward learning); increasing access to, and progression in, education, training and employment; and improvements in health and well-being.

Improvements in human and social capital and changes in young people's attitudes, thinking and behaviour are personal outcomes that are valuable in their own right, and can also, in turn, contribute to other outcomes, such as increasing access to, and progression in, education and improvements in health and well-being.

Similarly, because outcomes for an individual, like progression in education or training, contribute to societal outcomes like increases in economic growth, each of these outcomes can be thought of as a personal outcome for an individual young person and also a contribution to societal outcomes.

Civic and political outcomes

Civic and political outcomes are fairly well documented and understood and include changes in young people's engagement and activism in civil and political society, such as increases in voting, volunteering and direct action.

Civic and political engagement and activism can both depend upon youth organisations' contribution to personal outcomes, such as increases in young people's skills and confidence, and can also contribute to these outcomes (e.g. where civic activism helps enhance a young person's skills).

Civic and political activism can also contribute to societal outcomes, such as improvements in policy and service delivery (e.g. as a consequence of volunteering).

Differences in outcomes

Outcomes associated with youth organisations are not uniform. Differences in outcome reflect factors such as:

- differences in youth organisations' aims, structures and practices (including the quality of their work);
- differences in context, such as differences in state support and in the risks and opportunities young people are exposed to in different parts of Europe; and
- differences in young people's involvement in youth organisations and in the resources (such as human and social capital) they bring to youth organisations.

These differences impact on the extent to which the experiences and opportunities youth organisations offer match the abilities and interests of young people. This effects the extent to which young people choose to get involved (participation in youth organisations is voluntary) and what young people gain from their involvement (e.g. whether the opportunities offered extend their skills or not).

Data on outcomes and impact

Although both the mechanisms and outcomes associated with youth organisations are well understood and documented, evidence of outcomes (what changed, such as an increase in young people's skills) and in particular, of impact (the contribution youth organisations made to observed changes, such as an increase in young people's skills) is generally moderate or weak. This reflects the lack of data on outcomes, the difficulties of evaluating impact, and weakness in the approaches used to estimate impact.

Conclusions

The outcomes the study identifies for both individual young people (personal outcomes) and others (social outcomes) are of fundamental importance to Europe. By contributing to the acquisition of skills and changes in people's attitudes and behaviour, youth organisations contribute to personal, social, political and economic development and can help tackle the key challenges facing Europe, such as youth unemployment, the erosion of social cohesion and political disengagement. The strength of youth organisations therefore contributes directly to the social and economic strengths of Europe.

There is scope to enhance the sector's contribution further through partnerships with other (youth and also non-youth) organisations to exploit the potential youth organisations can offer for working with young people. This could include, for example, developing youth organisations' role:

- as providers of information, advice and guidance to young people in a range of areas such as health, employment and education;
- as educators, in areas like citizenship and sustainable development; and
- complementing the opportunities formal education offers, with non-formal educative experiences, that can extend young people's learning, in ways which formal education often struggles to do.

Nevertheless, youth organisations are not a "silver bullet" – they do not and cannot work with all young people or address all their needs. Their role complements that of other important institutions, like schools, colleges, social and youth services, and should be seen as neither a substitute for, nor competitor to, them.

Moreover it is difficult to assess the true value of youth organisation given the sector's diversity and the lack of data on outcomes and impacts. Improving both the measurement of outcomes and impact evaluation is vital to ensure that:

- the social value of youth organisations is understood and recognised, particularly given the current pressure upon government funding for the sector;
- organisations can be held accountable by stakeholders such as young people and their funders; and
- youth organisations can better understand their impact and how it can be maximised.

