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Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention  
Making a world of difference



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## INTRODUCTION

This Declaration, prepared within the framework of the Belgian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, is addressed to the Member States of the Council of Europe, the multilateral organisations (the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations), other European institutions, and political structures concerned with young people at national, regional and local level, the youth work field and young people themselves.

## THE 2ND EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK CONVENTION

The 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Convention, five years after the first, brought together some 500 participants active in the youth work field. They listened to plenary speeches and presentations, took part in 24 working groups and 20 site visits that created the opportunity to look ‘under the hood’ at youth work practice that, for them, might be innovative and different, provoking more profound reflection on their own perspectives and practice.

There are multiple claims about the contribution of youth work to the development of young people and society. The keynote speeches and discussions captured the following dimensions of the role and impact of youth work:

- Advancing democracy, human rights, citizenship, European values, participation, equal opportunities and voice
- Promoting peace-building, tolerance, intercultural learning; combating radicalisation, preventing extremism
- Dealing with social and personal ambiguities and change
- Strengthening positive identities and belonging, agency and autonomy
- Developing ‘soft’ skills, competences and capabilities, cultivating navigational capacities and broadening personal horizons
- Enabling transitions to ‘successful’ adulthood, particularly education to working life
- Cementing social inclusion and cohesion; upholding civil society
- Engaging in collaborative practice, partnership working and cross-sectorial cooperation

The 1<sup>st</sup> European Youth Work Declaration celebrated and gave direction to this *diversity* of opportunity, action and experience that may be positively attributed to youth work. Since then, however, the development of youth work in different parts of Europe has been varied. While youth work remains supported, politically and financially, in some countries, it has fallen victim to austerity measures and political indifference in others. Sometimes the claims made for youth work



appear to be unconvincing. Youth work, as a result, continues to face challenges of funding, recognition and credibility.

The objective of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Convention was to identify the *common ground* on which all 'youth work' stands and its relation to wider agendas of concern to public policy and issues facing young people. In the context of 'what brings us together is stronger than what divides us', the expectation from the Convention was to give a new impetus to the political and institutional debate around youth work in Europe, in order to foster further development and stronger recognition.

## THE SOCIAL SITUATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE

In many different ways, young people from all backgrounds live in precarious circumstances. Some face pronounced, extended and multiple challenges. All need some level of support, and support in strengthening their autonomy. While enjoying new opportunities enabled through new technologies and digital media, the expansion of educational opportunities, access to information and more, they also face risk and uncertainty. These include qualification inflation, rising unemployment, conflict and war, threats to mental and physical well-being, debt and poverty, social inequality and exclusion, and a lack of suitable housing. There have been simultaneous changes in social and political participation, the scale of early school leaving, inter-generational relations, unintended consequences of austerity and migration, and a growth in extremist perspectives and occasionally behaviour. Youth work in its many forms is often linked to these issues in policy narratives about raising awareness, prevention strategies, and the development and implementation of solutions.

## YOUTH WORK – DIVERSITY AND REALITY

There is certainly no easy path to finding common ground. Contemporary youth work practice encapsulates street work, open work, project and issue based work, self-organised activity through youth organisations, youth information, exchanges and more. Historically, as the Youth Partnership histories of youth work clearly convey, the origins and trajectories of youth work have been anchored in different ways, with different priorities and goals. The roots of youth work in western and eastern Europe were underpinned by very different values. Youth work has been conceptualised in many different ways. Political commitment to youth work in different Member States has varied considerably and sometimes ebbed and flowed dramatically. The structure and delivery of youth work has taken different forms, through religious organisations, municipalities and independent NGOs. Political recognition of youth work has taken many forms, sometimes through sufficient and sustainable funding, other times through the attachment of youth work to



wider youth policy agendas, the strengthening of the status of youth workers or the professionalization and accreditation of youth work practitioners.

Within this diversity, which in some respects should be celebrated, the quest for common ground may appear to be elusive, yet it is an imperative task if the role of youth work is to be better defined, its distinctive contribution communicated, and its connections with, and place within, wider policy priorities clarified. It was with these tasks that the youth workers, youth policy makers and youth researchers who attended the Convention were challenged.

A strong consensus on the role of youth work did, indeed, remain elusive. However, there was broad agreement concerning the contributions that can be made by youth work both independently and collaboratively.

## **AN OVERALL VISION FOR YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE**

Youth work is about cultivating the imagination, initiative, integration, involvement and aspiration of young people. Its principles are that it is educative, empowering, participative, expressive and inclusive. Through activities, playing and having fun, campaigning, the information exchange, mobility, volunteering, association and conversation, it fosters their understanding of their place within, and critical engagement with their communities and societies. Youth work helps young people to discover their talents, and develop the capacities and capabilities to navigate an ever more complex and challenging social, cultural and political environment. Youth work supports and encourages young people to explore new experiences and opportunities; it also enables them to recognise and manage the many risks they are likely to encounter. In turn, this produces a more integrated and positive attachment to their own identities and futures as well as to their societies, contributing purposefully to wider political and policy concerns around young people not in education, training and employment ('NEET'), health risk lifestyles, lack of civic responsibility and, currently, extremism.

Youth work engages with young people on their terms and on their 'turf', in response to their expressed and identified needs, in their own space or in spaces created for youth work practice. Youth work can also take place in others contexts (such as schools or prisons) but engagement with it needs to remain on a voluntary basis.



## YOUTH WORK – DISTINCTION AND INTRINSIC CHALLENGES

### 1. Aims and anticipated outcomes

The common ground of youth work is twofold. First, it is concerned with creating *spaces* for young people. Second, it provides *bridges* in their lives.

Both elements are fundamentally aimed at supporting the personal development of young people and strengthening their involvement in decision-making processes at local, regional, national and European levels. They are also focused on fostering ‘civic spirit’ and shared responsibilities among young people through the use of fun, creative non-formal learning activities.

Beyond creating autonomous spaces for youth work practice, youth work is also concerned with enabling young people to create their own spaces and opening spaces that are missing in other areas – such as schools, training, and labour markets. Similarly, youth work plays a bridging role in supporting young people’s social integration, especially young people at risk of social exclusion. Youth work also provides bridging support and advocacy in other contexts in young people’s lives.

There is pressure to specify and measure these and other outcomes of youth work. Attention should be given to outcomes and impact where they can be measured, but youth work should continue to focus on the processes and the needs of young people, remaining outcomes informed and not outcomes led. The Convention emphasised that youth work contributes to the development of attitudes and values in young people as much as more tangible skills and competences.

### 2. Emerging practice

Youth work has always adapted to a range of circumstances and changing trends while remaining true to its core principles. The common ground facing contemporary youth work practice throughout Europe has to embrace at least two current challenges.

First, young people are increasingly engaging with new technologies and digital media. There is clearly a role for online youth work practice, in terms of exploiting a new space for youth work in a meaningful way, supporting digital literacy and enabling young people to deal with some of the associated risks. The practice implications for youth workers lie in new competencies required and new forms of boundary maintenance in relationships with young people.

Secondly, the increasing cultural diversity across Europe means that youth work practice has become more focused on the integration of young people and supporting intercultural learning. Critical practice elements for youth work include enabling young people to explore and build their



own identities, attuning communication and information to culture and family contexts, and fostering inclusion while respecting cultural traditions and differences.

### **3. The quality of youth work practice**

Irrespective of who delivers youth work – paid or voluntary – that delivery has to be of high quality. In order to support and sustain the provision of quality youth work, there was agreement that the following measures need to be established.

There needs to be a core framework of quality standards for youth work responsive to national contexts, including competence models for youth workers, and accreditation systems for prior experience and learning. Further, there always needs to be an appropriate balance between the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and application of practical skills. To this end, training programmes need to demonstrate suitable mechanisms for ensuring the development of reflective practice (praxis).

Training provision should correspond to the realities of youth work at different levels, adopt creative methods such as peer learning and exchanging good practice. It should ensure responsiveness to trends and changing circumstances in young people's lives, such as technology and migration (as discussed above), as well as building capacity amongst youth workers for intercultural communication and language skills.

As youth work engages more with other sectors working with young people, there is an emerging need for cross-sectorial education and training for youth professionals in general.

## **YOUTH WORK – CONNECTIONS AND EXTRINSIC CHALLENGES**

### **4. Working together**

Youth work does and can address many social issues but seeks to balance this with more individualised questions of personal development and change. There were concerns that too much expectation can be placed on youth work to address societal problems, but this is essentially a question of balance and penetration.

There are inevitably tensions around youth work engaging with the agendas of others. There are always risks of being instrumentalised. However, the Convention agreed that youth work needs to strengthen connections with other sectors working with young people. The starting point is to jointly identify mutual objectives and opportunities for working together. Youth workers should be conscious of their own quality and importance and maintain their value base.



In particular, improved collaboration with formal education confers added value through ‘extended’ learning: youth work gives diversity and practical experience to formal education, and it also brings into schools the dimension of participation and co-creation. Youth work can also support young people’s progress in formal learning, thereby supporting attendance and attainment.

## 5. Recognition and Value

The Convention agreed that there are three levels of recognition that have, up to now, been insufficiently addressed and require further attention.

First, to gain more recognition youth work needs active promotion and advocacy by all relevant shareholders in politics, public sector and civil society at different levels. Second, there should be greater recognition of NGOs working in the youth work field, including as independent partners in the dialogue shaping youth work development. Third, there needs to be recognition and validation of the learning and achievement that takes place through youth work in non-formal and informal learning environments.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION POINTS – A EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR YOUTH WORK

Europe needs youth work! Investment in youth work is a necessary contribution to the development of a social Europe. Therefore the 2nd European Youth Work Convention is emphatic about the need for a ‘European Agenda for Youth Work’, with its main aim to strengthen youth work in Europe.

1. Elements of such a ‘European Agenda for Youth Work’ should include:
  - A need for more and continuous European co-operation to further develop and strengthen youth work in Europe. This should be fostered through a recommendation of ministers in the Council of Europe and in the European Union.
  - Responsibility for youth work rests at the level of Member States. The Convention sees a need to create a legal basis, national strategies or binding frameworks to safeguard and further develop youth work in the Member States.
  - In most of the Member States youth work is mainly carried out at the local level, which has the final responsibility for youth work. The Convention is asking for more awareness of this local level responsibility and to agree with the local and regional authorities on a European Charter for youth work at local level.
  - As youth work is mainly based on non-formal and informal learning the Convention is requesting the continuation of efforts to implement the existing and future European agendas on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.



- To gain more recognition youth work needs active promotion and advocacy by all actors in politics, public sector and civil society on the different levels, European, national, regional, local.

## 2. Improving the quality of youth work

- Quality youth work needs discussions about the necessary set of competencies and qualifications for youth workers and the development and implementation of related competence models.
- Training is a crucial element to support the development of quality youth work. Therefore strategies, concepts and programmes for the training of youth workers based on an agreed set of competences are needed.
- It is necessary to find ways of recognition of qualifications of youth workers - employed, freelancers or volunteers - through adequate forms of documentation, certification and validation of competencies, which youth workers gained throughout their practice.
- To help get youth work and youth workers' competencies recognised, national strategies on recognition of youth work and non-formal and informal learning in youth work are required.
- In some Member States youth work is recognised as a profession. However, pathways for the professionalization of youth work in co-operation with the educational sector are needed.

## 3. Towards a knowledge-based approach

- There have been some measures to support knowledge-based youth work in Europe. The Convention supports the different actors to consolidate their efforts to build a knowledge base for youth work in Europe.
- Youth work needs more national and European research – exploiting different methodologies - about the different forms of youth work, its values, impacts and merits.
- There is an identified need for support for appropriate forms of scrutiny, inquiry and assessment of youth work practice and concepts in Europe.
- Based on the evidence of monitoring and research, youth work has a need for mechanisms for the development of reflective practice in Europe.

## 4. Funding

- Youth work needs a sufficient and a sustainable system of funding. Within this, existing youth work practices and structures need to be funded as well as innovation and new forms of practice.





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- The European cooperation in youth work needs a strong instrument to financially support European exchange and cooperation. The Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme is the main source of funding these projects and continues to support European NGOs in the youth work field.
  - Funding instruments in youth work need to be accessible for the target groups, therefore access to information and sufficient guidance is needed.

#### 5. Towards common ground

- The Convention succeeded in taking some important further steps to find common ground for youth work in Europe. However, as youth work and its forms, conditions and practices in Europe remain so diverse, there is a need to continue work on exploring the common ground of youth work and its standards and concepts. These could result in a 'Charter for Youth Work in Europe'.
- There is a need for mutual development and the exchange of practices in youth work in Europe. Peer learning and peer review exercises on youth work will help to develop practices in and policies on youth work. Co-operation and exchange among youth work actors across Europe requires support for regular platforms for dialogue and sustainable networks and partnerships.
- Further development of the concepts and practice of youth work are required. Youth work has to find strategies to work on the current and emerging challenges faced by young people in Europe. Youth work has to renew its practice and strategies according to the changes and trends in society and politics. And youth work has to reach out to those target groups which are most affected by the social situation and living conditions of young people.
- Instruments at a European level are important for the development of youth work practice on other levels. There is a need to support the capacity of youth work to respond to new challenges and opportunities posed by new technologies and digital media.

#### 6. Cross-sectorial cooperation

- Youth work has established many links with other sectors, which has built up social practice for and with young people. There is a need for more collaborative practice, to gain more experience and develop models for closer cooperation between different actors from other sectors working with young people.
- These links and the existing practice should be mapped, monitored and evaluated in order to exchange the learning from these experiences throughout Europe.
- These forms of co-operation need to also be supported by cross-sectorial training.



## 7. Civic dialogue

- Participation is one of the main principles of youth work. The Convention is convinced that the development of youth work can only be taken further when young people get actively involved from the beginning at all levels - European, national, regional and local.
- As much as young people themselves, organisations in youth work working with and for young people need to be recognised and involved at all levels as partners in civic dialogue concerned with the development of youth work

## 8. The 3<sup>rd</sup> European Youth Work Convention

- The Convention is very grateful to the Belgian Chairmanship for hosting the 2nd European Youth Work Convention. The Convention emphasizes the need for having a regular exchange of concepts, strategies and practice of youth work in Europe and asks Member States, Council of Europe and the European Commission to take the initiative to organise a 3<sup>rd</sup> European Youth Work Convention.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Youth work is not a luxury but an existential necessity if a precarious Europe is to effectively address its concerns about social inclusion, cohesion and equal opportunities, and commitment to values of democracy and human rights. Youth work is a central component of a social Europe.

A failure to invest in youth work has three consequences. It is an abdication of responsibility to the next generation. It is a loss of opportunity to strengthen contemporary civil society throughout Europe. And finally, it weakens the potential for dealing effectively with some of the major social challenges (such as unemployment and extremism) of our time.