

## RAY TRIANGULAR SUMMIT

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### CHALLENGES OF YOUTH WORK IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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#### 1. Introduction

This input is based on two articles (“Youth work – an incomprehensible subject? Some thoughts about youth work and some introductory reflections”, “Conclusion and outlook”) of the book “Thinking seriously about youth work in Europe and how to prepare people to do it” (editors Hanjo Schild, Nuala Connolly, Francine Labadie, Jan Vanhee, Howard Williamson), to be published in the series “Youth Knowledge Books” by EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Council of Europe Editing, summer 2017.

#### 2. State of art with regard to political support of youth work: from defensive energy to creative engagement

In recent years the debates on youth work in a European context are manifold, both, on institutional side in the European Union and the Council of Europe and on side of researchers and youth work practitioners. Political statements, resolutions and recommendations of both, European Union and Council of Europe on youth work build a strong basis for the youth sector. However, these documents are far from sufficient to create a new dynamic around youth work, since, necessarily, they reflect the lowest common denominator of currently achievable aims and objectives. Consequently there is a lack of a clear and long-term political vision with regard to themes, priorities, aims and objectives.

#### 3. Gaps and needs (1). Recurring questions: what is youth work? what is a youth worker?

In Europe today there are thousands of youth work initiatives and projects that are meaningful young people and which have a similar relevance for their lives as formal education. But we still don't know *exactly* how many youth workers do this work in how many youth work initiatives. We are even lacking a *common* term and understanding of what youth work, what a youth worker is, and how they are educated or trained. We find well established youth work structures, mixed systems of youth work carried out by volunteers and paid youth workers, and youth work carried out exclusively by volunteers, often under poor conditions. We know also a diversity of well-developed vocational education and training and higher education schemes for the professional formation of youth workers, accredited systems of recognising youth work by national authorities and high quality curricula for youth workers. But still there is a need to work on defining the professional profiles of youth workers in a European context and how to prepare people to do it. And in times of Bologna there is a need to educate and train European youth workers at B.A. and M.A. level.

#### **4. Gaps and needs (2): youth work between instrumentalisation, control, autonomy and a European identity**

At a moment where youth work is needed more than ever to support and empower young people many member States limit or diminish their provision of youth work support, in other countries youth work is observed and controlled, and sometimes suppressed, by governments and authorities. This leads to the question how to defend the autonomy of youth work and to counteract the tendency to instrumentalise youth work for predominantly other interests, be it economics or politics. In view of the increased number of marginalized young people facing multiple and accumulated barriers to social inclusion youth work must not only support young people to master vulnerable situations, it must, together with young people themselves, scandalize social exclusion and discrimination, sensitize young people to democratic and social values, empower them to become critical citizens and enable them to take action for social change.

#### **5. What needs to be done? No need to reinvent the youth work wheel**

When finding answers to the question what youth work is we should not neglect the variety and differences in methods, disciplines, approaches and even philosophies and ideologies behind it. We should not aim at purifying one single and essential youth work concept irrespective of historical and cultural contexts. What we need is to overcome the differences in terms of opportunities by strengthening cooperation in the youth field with the aim of making sure that we provide opportunities for all young people to shape their own futures. The further development and promotion of youth work as a social practice needs stronger commitment, better infrastructure, instruments and tools, a better knowledge and more evidence, as well as creative and innovative ideas which go beyond the status quo and the current limits of the youth field. In the book that served as a basis for this input we proposed some elements, which should help creating further common ground. Three of these proposals are the creation of a European Agency for the Development of Youth Work, the design of an Advanced European Training Strategy for Education and Training of Youth Workers and Youth Leaders, including a joint university degree BA/MA on European Youth Studies and the establishment of a European Academy for Youth Policy, Youth Research & Youth Work. All these reflections should help paving the way to the 3rd European Youth Work Convention in 2020 in Germany.

#### **6. Final Remark**

At the end a little provocation from a rather personal perspective by asking why do we need and create continuously double structures, leading to competition, envy and waste of resources? In view of the weak position of the youth field, shouldn't we unite forces to create better conditions for all young people? Looking at the Council of Europe and the European Union we have two youth policy strategies, two political representative structures, two youth programmes, two education and training strategies, two validation and recognition tools, two tools providing youth knowledge, two participatory approaches. But: the two European Youth Centres (Strasbourg & Budapest) are only run by the Council of Europe, why not co-funded and used by the European Union, why does RAY "only" evaluate the impact of the E+/Youth in Action programme and not the activities of the CoE Youth Department and why do we have a EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership with such a limited scope of activities and budget? More questions could be raised... the answers will not necessarily lead to satisfying answers.