

Providing spaces
and building bridges:
**The role of youth work
in fostering social cohesion
in Europe**

Authors:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This discussion paper is a result of the European conference “**Regaining Europe – The Role of Youth Work in Supporting European Cohesion**” which took place on 12–15 March 2019 in Leipzig, Germany. The purpose of the paper is to reflect on the current European political agenda and to make a plea for a clear focus on democracy, social cohesion and human rights in European policies, in particular in the European Union and its member states. It assesses the critical situation in Europe in terms of eroding solidarity, growing nationalism, disturbing social division and environmental ignorance. It stresses the important role of active individual citizens as well as civil society to fight against social disparity and political shortcomings and underlines the role of the youth sector in this respect. Furthermore, it aims to support young people in their aspirations and competence to shape their future, not only in environmental, but also in democratic and social terms. The paper underlines the necessity for strong engagement to create a social, inclusive, solidly united, sustainable and democratic Europe.

Youth work has a central role to play in realising the vision of a cohesive Europe, as it provides a space for young people, for dialogue and for practiced European values on the one hand, and as it builds bridges to a new European narrative on the other hand.

This paper addresses youth workers, decision makers and key players from youth-related sectors and beyond. To begin with, it suggests focusing on the following three key areas for action: Democratic Europe, Social and Inclusive Europe, European Programmes.

A. INTRODUCTION

A spectre is haunting Europe – a spectre of eroding solidarity in society and between the European countries, of growing nationalism, xenophobia and social divisions, of environmental ignorance and of enhanced individualism and egoism. While many of the positive developments in Europe that relate to democracy, prosperity, freedom and peace since World War II, and particularly since 1989, must be highlighted, democracy, human rights and rule of law are being increasingly disrespected by governments and many citizens in a growing number of European countries. Poverty and social exclusion, poor health, care and education systems, precarious work situations and unemployment, housing problems and homelessness, racism and discrimination and disrespect for human dignity are being experienced by millions of people. Minorities, as well as many children and young people, are particularly vulnerable and experience uncertain prospects. Even if young Europeans' lives in the EU have generally improved in recent years, many challenges persist and some groups of young Europeans in particular suffer from inequalitiesⁱ.

A neoliberal and purely market-oriented economic policy based on a belief in unlimited growth and competitiveness has dominated the political agenda in the last decade. Democratic and social values, sustainable development and the idea of solidarity and indivisibility of our societies have been forced into the background.

The recent 2019 European Parliament elections have shown diverging reactions to this complex situation of social imbalance. On the one hand, populist and Eurosceptic forces were strengthened, while on the other hand, many citizens voted for a united and strong Europe. In addition to the elections, many citizens are standing up for their rights and fighting for better social living conditions. Young people, in particular, are resisting discrimination and exclusion.

In light of this complex situation, youth work has a lot to offer young people and society as a whole. It can, and should, play an active, central role in vitalising a social and democratic Europe for all. As a matter of fact, it is largely acknowledged that youth work fosters active citizenship, civic engagement, solidarity and social action. It promotes values such as human rights and democracy. Youth work can be a forum for democratic debates, for dialogue and for European initiatives. Thus, youth work can contribute

significantly to developing inclusive, democratic and peaceful societies and to “making a world of difference”, as stated in the “Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention”¹.

Consequently, the youth sector – young people, youth work and youth policy – which includes youth NGOs, youth welfare organisations, youth agencies and also individuals, must be aware of the political role it has to play. It should take greater responsibility and united action in shaping the future of all children and young people and it should contribute to safeguarding, and in some cases even regaining, democratic societies and Europe as a whole. Of course, the youth sector won’t change the world on its own, but it can do better by reaching out and being more appealing to more young people to contribute to a democratic and social Europe. Europe is not lost; it might need a renewal of its basic ideas, but it is alive and well.

This paper examines the following questions:

- How can youth work and youth policy support and create initiatives and trends to achieve greater social cohesion in Europe?
- How can youth work offer its core strengths, i.e. the “provision of space for young people”² and the creation of “bridges, as young people move along the path towards adulthood, citizenship and greater personal responsibility”³?
- How can youth work provide spaces for dialogue, respect and European values to reduce polarisation in European societies as a whole and build bridges to new perspectives and European narratives?

i See Commission Staff Working Document on the situation of young people in the European Union:
https://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/eu-youth-strategy-adopted_en

1 <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/eywc-website-declaration>

2 Howard Williamson: Winning space, building bridges – What youth work is all about, in: Hanjo Schild, Nuala Connolly, Francine Labadie, Jan Vanhee, Howard Williamson (eds.): Thinking Seriously about Youth Work. And how to prepare people to do it, Strasbourg 2017, p. 15–26, here p. 16.

3 *ibid.*

B. THREE KEY AREAS FOR ACTION

Besides addressing European leaders and policy makers at all levels, the youth sector itself is capable of contributing to the (re)vitalisation of Europe by demanding a better policy which would satisfy the needs, demands and concerns of all citizens, including the youth.

Three key areas are regarded as crucial for strengthening a democratic, inclusive and social Europe.

1. Democratic Europe

Europe cannot function without the active European citizenship and engagement of young people. The development of a Europe of citizens and of a European civil society is crucial in fostering a democratic Europe. Youth welfare, youth work and youth organisations have a strong and proactive role to play in this respect. Participatory principles in all spheres of young people's lives are crucial to establishing a democratic everyday culture in society, and participation in youth work activities pave the way in this regard. Opportunities for participation from the local to the European level as well as beyond the national borders are needed. Thus, civil society must be given a systematic and structured role in shaping European policies. A strengthened democratic profile for Europe also calls for increased and improved learning, for more information and knowledge and a better understanding of Europe, in formal as well as in non-formal education. For this reason, a stronger emphasis should be on education for democratic citizenship and human rights aimed at an informed and critical European identity and awareness. For the latter, a positive, tolerant and open-minded outlook is needed based on a clear understanding of European structures and responsibilities.

To achieve a strengthened democratic Europe, the following is necessary:

- to support concrete actions for democratic participation in representative democracy as well as in everyday life and in communities;
- to encourage critical reflection on open questions regarding the future of Europe, on democracy, human rights, the rule of law as well as on European values and a positive European identity;
- to raise awareness and openness within the youth field for new topics which concern

the future of young people, such as environmental issues, anti-racism, anti-discrimination and living in the digital era;

- to promote increased learning and education about Europe and to develop and adopt an action plan for European citizenship and human rights education in both formal and non-formal education.

2. Social and Inclusive Europe

The implications of the economic crisis following the year 2008 had a significant impact on the younger generation and are still apparent today. This is a daily reminder of how vital it is to strengthen a social and inclusive Europe. And it illustrates how very necessary it is to take responsibility for providing a favourable environment in all policy areas which concern young people in order to grow up happy and successfully. It is unacceptable that millions of young people are still and continuously unemployed and underemployed, subject to uncertain working conditions or obliged to agree to traineeships without remuneration and social protection. And it is unacceptable that hundreds of thousands of young migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other minorities don't have the same rights as all young people in Europe to live a decent life with dignity. Consequently, youth policy as a sectoral and a cross-sectoral policy field needs to provide space for the participation as well as the personal and social development of young people.

To achieve a strengthened social and inclusive Europe, the following is necessary:

- to ensure a comprehensive social and inclusive policy for all young people and in all relevant policy areas, such as labour, health, education, housing, justice and youth;
- to guarantee easy access to appropriate education and training schemes and sustainable jobs for all young people;
- to create inclusively-designed youth work structures for all young people, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in order to support them becoming a part of Europe;
- to help young people overcome difficult situations through e.g. conflict resolution, peace building and intercultural understanding in youth work activities;
- to make use of the “Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy”ⁱⁱ via concrete national inclusion and diversity strategies and projects and accompanying policy measures.

ii https://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/20150130-youth-inclusion-diversity-strategy_en;
Strategy and materials available at www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionstrategy

3. European Programmes

In the European Union, Erasmus+ YOUTH IN ACTION and the European Solidarity Corps are *the* programmes that foster the mobility and exchange of young people across Europe and thus promote European awareness and engagement, human rights and active European citizenship. Beyond this, the programmes support European cooperation in youth work and youth policy. In the Council of Europe, intergovernmental cooperation, the European Youth Foundation, the education and training schemes and thematic campaigns promote the core values of the organisation. Throughout all of this, the European values, defined as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights, including minority rights in the Treaty on European Union,⁴ play a major role. Young people's personal experiences of Europe, gained through participating in European youth projects or volunteering activities, often lead to committing to Europe in the long-term. Encounters with other young people from a wider Europe or from outside Europe foster mutual understanding, peace building and respect for human rights.⁵ The opportunities provided through programmes in both the EU and Council of Europe are far from addressing all young people and a recognition of these activities lags behind their relevance. Thus, in view of the current political situation and despite a recent substantial budgetary increase of the European programmes, still more needs to be done.

To achieve strengthened European programmes, the following is necessary:

- to give all young people access to learning opportunities through cross-border mobility and volunteering, thus creating a “right to mobility”;
- to take an increased and special responsibility for promoting young people's active European citizenship and European values based on democracy and human rights;
- to adopt concrete monitoring mechanisms for making sure that the aims and objectives are achieved and to assess the application of European programmes in terms of compliance of priorities and the participation of target groups;
- that the National Agencies of the EU youth programmes and other key actors in the youth field play a key role in pushing for larger programmes, better implementation and a wider impact;

4 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2012:326:FULL&from=EN>

5 <https://www.researchyouth.eu/>

to consistently implement the priorities and actions as adopted in the EU Youth Strategy and the Council of Europe's Agenda 2020 to shape an extended and relevant youth policy cooperation for the future and establish an impactful "European Youth Work Agenda" as called for by the 2nd European Youth Work Convention⁶ as well as by the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027)⁷ and the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on youth work of the Council of Europe (2017).⁸

6 https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262187/The+2nd+European+Youth+Work+Declaration_FINAL.pdf

7 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2018:456:FULL&from=EN>

8 https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680717e78

C. A NEW NARRATIVE FOR EUROPE

When considering the future of Europe, a wider public arena is needed with more spaces, bridges, opportunities and dialogues about Europe. A new narrative, based on certain essential principles at policy level and in civil society, including youth work, needs to be practiced. Youth work can contribute substantially to creating necessary spaces and building bridges for a new European narrative.

— Europe is deeply rooted in its local and regional structures. Youth work and youth policy are most effective at local and regional levels due to the close contact with young people, their needs and aspirations and the responsibility of local structures to create a favourable environment with and for young people. However, municipalities and regions tend to see themselves as entities that are affected by Europe rather than as active European subjects. Hence, there is a need for a shift in the paradigm towards a bottom-up perspective. Europe needs to go local and support regional governments and municipalities to take responsibility for Europe and young people. Municipalities need spaces and platforms for exchange to experience European identity, practice cooperation and enrich the local level with a European dimension. At all levels, there are millions of European “contacts” every single day: at work, at school, at university, in projects and in leisure time. And there are countless individuals in NGOs, in academia, in public organisations and authorities, the private sector and in politics practicing European cooperation on a daily basis. There are friendships, teams and collaborators that stretch across the entire continent. There are European families for whom cultural and linguistic diversity is a normal part of their daily lives. All of them are part of the European reality. They tell the story of Europe from the bottom up and need to be seen and heard more.

— The reality in Europe and its member states is diverse, complex and challenging, sometimes also polarised. Community-based action applies social, inclusive, fair, participatory and democratic principles which serve all citizens and civil society at large. The European policy agenda must not divide citizens and civil society into winners and losers or only serve a particular group of people. European societies must be indivisible and diverse, and benefits must be accessible to all.

A new European narrative needs to be written, shaped and brought to life by the young generation, together with those working in civil society, politics, administration and business. Young people and youth work must play an essential role in this respect while maintaining a critical view of Europe.

Now is the time to foster an open, social, inclusive and democratic Europe.

It is time to act!

More information:

www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/RegainingEurope

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