

MOVE IT

26 May - 17 June 2020

Youth mobility in the digital era

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online
event

Photo: Sebastian Voortman

 **JUGEND
für Europa**

National Agency (Germany)
Erasmus + Youth in Action
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International Youth Service of the
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 **Estonian Youth Work Centre**
20 years empowering youth



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Documentation (interview)

MOVE IT: Insights from the organisers

Interview with Ülly Enn (ENTK), Suvi Tuominen (Verke), Daniel Poli (IJAB) and Manfred von Hebel (JUGEND für Europa)



The MOVE IT - Youth mobility in the digital era (online event) launched via Facebook Live on 26 May and continued with an exciting mix of online formats during seven sessions until 17 June. In this long-read interview, we are hearing from organisers and experts who reflect on MOVE IT and thoughts on the present and future of digital youth work and mobility.

The original MOVE IT conference was going to take place during three days in mid-May in Bonn (Germany). COVID-19 and the complete halt of international travel suddenly left the organisers with three options: cancel, postpone or transform. The new context had catapulted digital youth work and digital mobility into the spotlight and the interest in debating this hot topic was huge. The timing was

right, the organisers decided to opt for the transformation into an online event stretching over a longer period of time (4 weeks) with a lighter schedule (seven shorter sessions).

Organising the new MOVE IT - Youth mobility in the digital era (online event) was a challenge because it was a first time in many aspects and the learning curve for everybody was steep. New formats and methodologies require time and preparation nobody ever has enough of even under normal circumstances. Trying things out is the best approach to learning and hundreds of interested attendees were ready to join for the launch. All of whom young people, youth workers, trainers and experts from the field of youth work from all over Europe.

Let us here directly from the organisers, some of whom have been implementing innovative projects in the field of digital youth work for years.

Daniel Poli, Head of the Division Professionalisation and Advancement of International Youth Work, at IJAB International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany, said in the interview that, "Indeed, with MOVE IT we are currently trying out entirely new formats which could certainly be ground-breaking in the future, for European and international events."

One of those new formats was the MOVE IT Online BarCamp on 27 May, the first session for registered participants only the day after the public launch of MOVE IT via Facebook Live. Poli specified that formats such as the MOVE IT Online BarCamp allowed for transferring to a new form of online cooperation. "The participants were motivated by an exciting mix of video conferencing, surveys and playful elements to present their topics, questions and project ideas. And to offer their own sessions. The session plan provided a clear overview of the structure, people could easily join the discussion rooms and there was even space for informal exchange."

"This type of format, which conveys an event feeling, allowing for a lot of active participant participation as opposed to passive listening are, in my opinion, trendsetting and will become more and more popular," he adds.

Manfred von Hebel, Deputy Director with JUGEND für Europa, the National Agency for the EU programmes Erasmus+ Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps in Germany, gave a shout out to the MOVE IT team for successfully piecing together an online event "that can give very timely answers to very current questions."

"[...] It seems to work out, as more than 160 people joined the opening session and more than 100 attended the MOVE IT Online BarCamp on the second day," said von Hebel. "I am really happy and grateful that we are able to co-host MOVE IT the way we are doing it right now. The original conference was planned to be entirely different, the pandemic threw us into a completely new planning scenario."

Hybrid reality: blending the physical and virtual

Can virtual events substitute physical mobility entirely? This was the number one question across all MOVE IT session.

"It is clear that physical experiences will continue to be the focus and, hopefully, we will be able to hold physical events again soon. But it is also clear that we are learning that many things are also possible digitally," comments Daniel Poli.

One buzzword that continued to echo in between the videoconferences and online chat conversations was 'hybrid', meaning that digital youth work would ideally contribute to the creation of hybrid spaces where both physical and digital experiences are going to blend together within a single event.

“I think that hybrid forms will prevail in the future, they offer great potential for innovation. The MOVE IT Online BarCamp in particular offered a wide range of opportunities, not only in terms of content but also in terms of getting to know each other and informal exchange with other people from all over Europe. Those who seized these opportunities were able to get a lot out of the event,” says Poli.

“European mobility helps to understand various cultures and situations in Europe. And to experience and feel the common European spirit. Digital youth work can be used as a tool or content in physical mobilities, for example in group exercises via smartphone apps. Digital platforms can also be used as a bridge before and after mobility,” adds **Suvi Tuominen**, manager at Verke, Centre of Expertise for Digital Youth Work, in Finland, on how digital youth work can generally enrich European mobility.

Culture shock: Only one year ago none of this seemed possible

Back in 2019 it was difficult, if not outright impossible, to predict the current situation and the many changes it has already brought. From the transformation of MOVE IT into an online event to how the landscape of digital youth work would change and its relevance increase. Little did they know when one organisation from Estonia, two from Finland and two organisations from Germany sat down together for the first time to plan and discuss their future MOVE IT conference.

Ülly Enn, Action manager with the Estonian Youth Work Centre / Eesti Noorsootöö Keskus (ENTK), said in our interview that she felt that “there has been a certain degree of cultural shock in the [youth mobility] field when the activities could not be continued in usual ways during the lockdown, especially in European mobility activities.”

“Even if we take a broader look beyond the immediate impact of the COVID crisis and consider the future digital development as such, we find a lot of similarities to what is often said for international mobility encounters. We will need to learn how to cope with the unknown, adjust to it and develop competencies to be able to do so,” says Enn.

Nobody could imagine how significant digital youth work would be a year later, a field of youth work that, in the words of Enn, surely has “exciting times ahead”.

“Digital change influences our society in many ways,” adds Daniel Poli.

“The entire life of young people is strongly influenced by these changes. Youth work has the task of supporting the personal and social development of young people. So far, in many areas of youth work too little attention has been paid to digital spaces,” he says.

“Even before the COVID crisis, it was an important concern [...] that youth work should focus much more on digitalisation and provide adequate services for young people [...]. With the crisis, we suddenly realised how important it is to rush through the steps of digitalisation that we’ve missed in the past. I think much of the developments triggered in 2020 will continue to help develop digital youth work and provide good, future-orientated services for young people in the next years,” according to Poli.

For Manfred von Hebel, the current context is a fresh opportunity for learning. “Intercultural learning is about learning in a very holistic way,” he says.

“It’s a cognitive process but on the same level a physical and emotional way of learning. That’s why non-formal and informal learning in cross-border mobility often has such a strong and sustainable impact on young people. These experiences can hardly be replaced by virtual activities,” says von Hebel.

“The greatest strength is perhaps that virtual activities offer new opportunities to prepare, accompany and follow-up physical mobilities in a much more comprehensive and structured way than before. This, of course, doesn’t only apply to youth exchanges but could become an increasingly important element in the youth field, from professional exchanges to staff mobilities and networking of organisations,” he says.

Strong youth policies in Estonia and Finland

Strong national youth policies definitely push the advancement of sound digital youth work practices and foster youth mobility in both ordinary and extraordinary times. This said, few countries in Europe have national youth policies as strong as the policies in Estonia and Finland.

Ülly Enn explained that Estonia has invested decades of time and effort into developing an evidence-based and engaging, contemporary youth policy. This strong policy was key to keeping all youth organisations across the country in a working mood during the COVID crisis and to “reorient to remote learning”.

“It was considered important on the state level to make sure the youth field activities would continue,” says Enn. “I believe that this might well be one of the key strengths of the youth field in Estonia: a clear strategic outlook, a well-developed, structural approach with key supportive elements in place, such as occupational standards for youth worker, youth work curricula in three academic institutions up to MA level and a systematic model for assessing the quality of youth work services on [the] local level,” she says.

Finland is another country with an A-list youth policy where the youth act [law] enables the Ministry of Education and Culture to establish national centres of expertise. Verke is part of this national youth work infrastructure.

Verke manager Suvi Tuominen comments on why youth workers should boldly look at the new opportunities that the digital sphere is opening up for youth work.

“The physical world and the online world should not be seen as counterparts. They can complement each other, both of them have their pros and cons, but neither can substitute the other. And that should not be seen as the purpose,” says Tuominen.

“At the moment, when we think about technology, we mainly think about the internet, web browsers and apps. But there is more to it: wearables, AR (augmented reality), VR (virtual reality), and some other things we do not know of yet. Youth workers should be boldly looking at these new opportunities. Some of the possibilities we have opened are explained in more detail in the book ‘Digitalisation and Youth work’, that Verke published together with the Estonian Youth Work Centre a couple of years ago,” says Tuominen.

Tips for the future

In the near future, at least for some time, virtual events will prevail. International youth mobility is due to resume eventually and, hopefully, it will be enriched with new digital aspects that we are merely discovering just now. So, how to make the most of it?

“To make the best out of an online meeting or a virtual learning activity, I think it helps when things are well-planned, organised and moderated. A certain set of online rules is necessary as well as the commitment of participants to stick to these rules,” advises von Hebel.

“My advice would be to simply get involved, to be curious about new things and not to insist so much on the old, tried and tested ways. With this open attitude, we can all benefit from purely virtual events, even if we miss the physical exchange,” also concludes Poli.

“Standing on the doorstep of end of the COVID crisis now, it has to be emphasised that youth workers play [a] critically important role in creating trustful relationships and providing meaningful support to young people,” says Enn.

However, as Enn reflects further on: “[...] It is important that a diversity of youth services continues / resumes as soon as possible and it is important that the financial support for these activities is continued, despite the challenging economic conditions. International youth mobility is surely one of the vulnerable areas in this respect. What will we do, in the worst case scenario, if the virus starts to spread very rapidly again?”

While we do not know the answers to many questions about the future, Suvi Tuominen, on a final note, added some certainty by saying that the future takes to be “be bold in experimenting with new technologies!”.

Stefan Alijevikj on behalf of MOVE IT / JUGEND für Europa

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Detailed documentation feat. articles, programme and visual summaries, links to recordings etc.