



by Marianne Schapmans



# DISSOLVING FINANCIAL BARRIERS IS NOT ENOUGH YOU NEED TO QUESTION YOUR OWN VALUES & VISION...

**Lots of young people are reached by a ► Open youth work mixture of youth organisations. These initiatives exist in all sizes and colours and bring dynamics along with energy into local community life.**

In most cases they are progressive, creative and open-minded. Even though we can perceive some difficulties for a certain group of youngsters to enter youth work initiatives.

To support existing and new youth work initiatives in dealing with disadvantaged young people, a Flemish (Belgian) organisation called "UIT DE MARGE" developed a support service, based on years of practical experience. "UIT DE MARGE" freely translated means: out of the margin. Getting out of "the side-line".

In the year 2000, this national organisation went through a restructuring process, and from then on, it had in place a support structure in every province of Flanders. Cojema is the regional pillar of Uit de Marge, in the east of Flanders. Flanders is not that big, but a regional approach is very important in the view of this organisation.

Marianne Schapmans (Flemish Youth Council) had a chat for Coyote with Phillip De Vriendt about his work in Cojema. Cojema, (which means coordination of youth work and social disadvantage), wants to support, to connect, to train, to motive, to guide all youth work organisations working with disadvantaged youngsters.

Young people in vulnerable situations, often referred to as disadvantaged youngsters, have to deal with more difficulties to participate in regular youth initiatives. Some barriers underlie this inaccessibility.

These barriers can be different for every individual.

A difficulty to access, or to enter youth work, is associated with various reasons. In practice a number of organisations believe that "openness" will be sufficient to succeed in being accessible for all youngsters in society. Openness is not enough. A lot of other barriers have to be dealt with. In plenty of examples we see organisations using every effort to reach disadvantaged young people, without success. These efforts require lots of energy from youth workers and volunteers. When the effort isn't perceived as worthwhile, very often it turns into an awfully disappointing experience frequently followed by apparently logical conclusions. "We offered so much, we modified our activities, we promoted them hard, but they don't want to participate. It's their own fault, it's their own choice".

It's not enough to dissolve practical and financial barriers. When barriers are removed, it should be done equally for all participants. Disadvantaged youngsters feel dreadfully uncomfortable, for example, when activities are free for them only. They feel like they have been marked, categorized and watched... like a big arrow points to them to declare: "they are different, they are poor". No one wants to be this exception because of a difficult background, a complicated family life. Free is not the solution, everyone can contribute. When activities are free of charge, it seems like they are less valuable. What's intended as helpful, can become very painful. Thinking about practical barriers is a first step; it's also essential to chew over probable stigmata being created by new regulations. Place yourself in someone else's situation, and become sensitive about how denigrating "being helped" can feel.

► **Difficult? Cool!**

Other initiatives do reach disadvantaged youngsters without meaning to. Sometimes they point out some group problems and identify these youngsters as more difficult, thorny and complex. Also in this situation it is beneficial to reflect on the underlying processes. Regularly the emphasis is not focused on the youngsters themselves, but only on elements of their behaviour. They are difficult, they tease, they make trouble, they are obnoxious...

Always being labelled “the bad one”, also provokes a stigma effect. This behaviour stands not on its own - a large amount of messages can lie behind it, just waiting to be noticed. Youngsters feel ashamed, disgraced, dishonoured. In building up a constructive and positive relationship it's crucial for youth workers to refocus their attention. Not behaviour or living conditions need to be centralised, but the youngster as a person deserves a central position. Because besides their problems, their difficult behaviour and their complex living conditions, they hold a lot of talents, qualities, competences, capacities... The problem-focus should be replaced by a positive focus. An enormous potential for the basis of a positive relationship will be discovered!

► **Diversity & positive approach**

To open up structures, to welcome all youngsters whatever their background is, sounds easier than practice finally shows. To be open for all youngsters is - from time to time - perceived as a kind of a threat for an already established group. Will all members stay when youngsters with a different background participate, when their values will be questioned?

To extend a youth work initiative and enlarge participation of disadvantaged youngsters can't just be the project of one or two persons. It's crucial that this idea is carried by a larger platform of partners. Youth workers, parents, members - they all need to be convinced.

Diversity is different from integration. We live in a society where people have different backgrounds, religions, philosophy, sexual preferences... To open youth initiatives for all youngsters means respecting differences. Respecting goes further than asking to integrate and to adapt to our established patterns.

The catchphrase **“all equal, all different, all different, all equal”** covers this perfectly.

To deal with youngsters in a positive way is crucial. Strengthening qualities instead of limiting attention to their perceived difficult behaviour. Recognizing and encouraging potential instead of highlighting hitches.

Consider before you start. Youth work in a very dissimilar context requires more than a few technical changes. Your established traditions will be challenged. It's not the difficulty that should be in the first place - concentrate instead primarily on how rich, fruitful and enlightening this can be for everyone involved.

► **Help! Cojema:**

Youth work organisations in Flanders are not left alone in this complex process. They can count on personal support and good

advice. An extensive service has been developed over the last couple of years. There's plenty of documentation and information available and nearby for youth workers, students...

On request, Cojema acts as a mediator to local and regional authorities and if necessary a process can be started on establishing a strategy of including disadvantages youngsters in regular youth work. Increasing awareness is a permanent assignment.

Therefore Cojema is present in several advisory councils and working groups. Cooperation and partnership is a regular way of working.

To support youth workers in their daily work, Cojema organizes monthly moments of "inter-vision" for youth workers and coordinators. In these group sessions any subject can be discussed, every one is equal and all topics have the same importance. These moments are extremely informing and fertile for everyone. Participants value these sessions as a real support.

► **Training**

Disadvantaged youngsters don't commit themselves easily to a leadership position in youth work. Even when they have been participating for years, the first step to a responsible position is often too big. The presumption of a lack of attention to their personal lives, to the meaning of childhood in their own culture and a brand new, unknown group causes hesitancy.

Cojema/ uit de marge organizes training for trainers for youngsters with a disadvantaged background. This course offers a solid base to get involved as a youth leader.

The working methods of these courses are first of all very ACTIVE. Working groups are kept small, (around 12 participants); and learning by doing is the crucial guideline. Theory is banished and replaced by practical training. The programme is similar to a regular training for trainers course, only the methods differ. First aid, leadership qualities, creating games, dealing with conflicts, dealing with aggression... it's all in the course outline.

After 60 hours of training, every participant starts a 60-hour "field training" in a local youth work organisation.

They are members of the group of trainers, they prepare and run activities. They get coached by a more experienced trainer. It's not a practice in observation, but in real participation.

A positive outcome of the training process leads to certification as “youth worker”, recognized by the Flemish Government. This is an endorsement of the participants' motivation and competence.

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