

Arriving at the declaration on youth work

DURING THE 1ST EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK CONVENTION

by Karen Jacobs

project team, Belgian EU Presidency – Youth, Division for Youth, Flemish Government;

Koen Lambert

director of JINT, National Agency for the Youth in Action Programme of the Flemish Government;

Leen Van Bockstal

project assistant Belgian, EU Presidency-Youth, JINT, National Agency for the Youth in Action Programme of the Flemish Government



First Things First

The 1st european youth work convention

A convention on the topic of youth work did not come ‘out of the blue’. In **November 2009, the renewed EU framework** for co-operation in the youth field highlighted the need to ‘support and develop youth work’. At the same time, the European Commission, in its Youth in Action work plan, expressed the intention to organise a conference for youth workers. (In European policy texts the commonly used language is ‘youth workers and youth leaders’). The Council of Europe from its side adopted in 2008 the ‘Agenda 2020’ concerning ‘The future of the Council of Europe youth policy’. The then upcoming Belgian EU Presidency – Youth was very motivated to tackle the topic since the three communities of Belgium have a long tradition of youth work and youth-work-related policy. The time was ripe, and so the presidency decided to make the most of the momentum to put, and keep, youth work on the EU political agenda. For the Belgian EU Presidency – Youth, the Flemish Community took the lead with regard to organising the **convention**, in close co-operation with the French and German-speaking Communities.

We had the topic, youth work, but needed to focus. As described in the renewed framework for European co-operation in the youth field, youth work ‘is a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people’.

To be able to do so, both Jint (the national agency for the Youth in Action Programme) and the Division for Youth of the Flemish Community sat down to figure out what this first convention could be about, and what would be its look and feel. We kind of felt like explorers, covering unknown land, or like a cat that pokes around the bed before finding the perfect spot to lie down.

We chose not to talk about everything at once, and left the eight fields of action of the renewed framework to the side for the moment. We quietly looked at other presidencies or opportunities to talk in depth about the contribution of youth work to employment and entrepreneurship, creativity and culture, education and training, for example.

We wanted to **start with the very beginning**. This meant having a talk **about youth work itself**, taking into account its diversity and enabling it to grow and reinforce itself. We did not want to indulge in navel-gazing, but to be positive and approach it in a discerning way while looking forward to the future.

The last thing we wanted to do was to reinvent the wheel, so we **started from already existing processes, using knowledge from both European and national levels**. Together with European and national experts, we went in search of a number of transversal youth-work-related themes to discuss.

We also wanted to take into consideration the different national realities in Europe, the different types of youth work, the different methods and approaches used in youth work and its different target groups.

This had to be clear and present on all levels: the content, the participants, in the way we organised workshops, etc. On top of this, all five senses needed to be stimulated. The convention could not be boring, but **needed a playful and interesting approach**.

As we elaborated on our ideas and explained our concept to different parties, everyone sensed the possibilities, but a certain fear of these untested waters was present. Nonetheless we received **green lights from our headquarters** and set sail towards the convention.

We started phoning all over Europe in order to get a full, rich and interesting programme, both in the plenary and workshop sessions. Our journey from meeting to meeting, mail to mail, phone to phone took full form.

In order to prepare the participants for the convention, an **extra edition** with a whole new look and feel of the *Coyote* magazine saw the light.

And finally, there we were, in Ghent at the beginning of July at the Vooruit building, very anxious about how everything would fall into place. We did not really know whether in real life the concept would be as thrilling as we had imagined. Not being able to estimate whether all the participants, from youth workers to politicians, would find their places and find the convention stimulating and inspiring for their current work.

For the first time, official **delegations from 50 countries from all over Europe** – the 50 countries that signed the European Cultural Convention – came together in Ghent to discuss youth work and its future in Europe. By taking the floor together, both the European Union and the Council of Europe acknowledged youth work and expressed their intention to move forward on this topic. Some interesting numbers from the convention:

- around 400 people attended, amongst whom a considerable number of youth workers, alongside researchers, policy makers, civil servants, members of national youth councils, trainers, etc.;
- 25 thematic discussion workshops on nine youth-work-related topics were held;
- 27 Youth Work in Action workshops (practices from all over Europe) took place;
- 18 group visits to youth work practices in Ghent were organised;
- and a number of plenary sessions were given by youth workers, researchers, policy makers, etc.

We got everyone started by discovering the building, the topic and the participants. We tickled everyone’s brain, got them in the mood, had them running around in the different rooms and buildings... and they liked it, in fact they loved it. From day one we knew we had **hit the bull’s eye**. And it felt brilliant!



Declaration under construction

In preparing for the convention, we knew we needed something concrete at the end of it. We wanted **to put and keep youth work on the political agenda**. Therefore the convention was always meant to be **the start of a new process** and we wanted to **ensure a follow-up**, something **for the future**. The idea came to mind to write a declaration on the spot.

The declaration had to be based on the outcomes of the thematic discussion workshops, inspired by what was heard from either the Youth Work in Action workshops or the plenary sessions, and with the utmost respect for what the participants deemed important.

Four General Rapporteurs, coming from research, youth work organisations or a national agency, were assigned to write the declaration. Julie Godfroid, Danijela Juric, Hans-Georg Wicke and Howard Williamson knew from day one that the days would be long and the nights would be short. To help them master all the input, we set up a reporting system together with them and the facilitators, using everyone's experience.

A conference held by the NJI in Rotterdam in March 2010 gave us the contact details of facilitators that were into this topic and approach. In addition, we had an open call to complete the group. **Overall some 30 facilitators and rapporteurs** were trained in Ghent in order to find a common approach.

The facilitators were responsible for encouraging participants to express their ideas as much as possible. The rapporteurs wrote everything down, including indicating the priorities after the group came to conclusions or key messages. They then sent every report to a central mailing address which the General Rapporteurs could access.

Although some results were already ready on 8 July, the General Rapporteurs had to wait until Friday the 9th in the afternoon before they had received everything. Finally on Friday in the late afternoon they could sit down together and work their way through all the material. They started discussing, **re-arranging the available material** and developing their own process of how to get to a declaration. We, the organisers, stayed behind the scenes. We were close by to help them when they got stuck, but always kept a distance in terms of content. Our main task was to give them support, food and drinks, shelter and a safe environment in which to write. It took until late after midnight, while the participants were having a great party at Vooruit, to arrive at the final version of the declaration. Tired but satisfied, they laid the paper in our hands.

What is the declaration about??

When we received the declaration, it was a moment of truth. We did not know what the outcome would be. So we were very eager to read the messages inside. The General Rapporteurs started by **looking back at the history of youth work**, which was as diverse and complex in the past as it is today. They then focused on **contemporary youth work and youth work in the future**, as this was the scope of the convention.

Although the General Rapporteurs did not want to enter into a 'definition debate', some complementary insights on what youth work is about were added. During the convention youth work was briefly defined as the provision of 'space and opportunity for young people to shape their own future', stressing the diversity of youth work in the forms in which it engages with different young people, using different methodologies, addressing different issues and operating in different contexts. It also took into account that youth work practice continuously adapts, unfolds and develops over time.

The following is the list of the topics tackled in the declaration:

- > youth work today;
- > youth work and policy priorities;
- > position and cross-sectorial co-operation;
- > information, impact and effect;
- > youth work for all and in diversity;
- > the quality of the practice;
- > competence, training and recognition;
- > mobility and networking;
- > sustainable support and funding;
- > next steps.

Concerning **youth work and policy priorities**, it was stated that youth workers and young people should be involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of youth policy. Youth work organisations and politicians still need to establish a better knowledge of each other, and specific initiatives in the youth field should take the principles and values of youth work into consideration. Current processes, such as the 'structured dialogue', need to be strengthened in the future.

Cross-sectorial co-operation takes different forms. For youth work to engage better in the processes of communication, co-ordination and co-operation, it must face the challenge of the identity of youth work and a fear of being just an instrument for other youth-policy-related purposes (otherwise known as 'instrumentalisation'). What is important is to carefully negotiate the 'rules of engagement' on an equal basis for all parties involved and from a starting point of mutual respect.

Because of the diversity of youth work, there needs to be an equivalently diverse approach to identifying the contribution it makes to young people and society. Only with better **information and knowledge on youth work** can its **impact** be better understood, disseminated and evaluated. Both quantitative and qualitative 'evidence' needs to be collected, collated and analysed. This is in order to promote the visibility of youth work, foster quality in practice and thereby enhance the credibility of youth work. It was put forward that the proclaimed 'golden triangle' of youth research, policy and practice needed to be enlarged into a square incorporating youth organisations and young people.



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During the convention, **diversity** in youth work was linked to accessibility for all. However, youth workers also need more advanced training in and commitment to universal values in order to face the rapidly changing demands of diverse populations of young people. Youth work must avoid seeing any group of young people solely as targets for inclusion and participation and more as partners in activism for the promotion of diversity in society. Adaptation to the lives of young people and current times is in order.

Furthermore, with regard to the **quality of practice**, youth work is an unusual professional practice in that it is delivered both by voluntary and paid workers. Routes to individual validation through the accreditation of prior learning must be established and respected. This can be achieved through the establishment of quality standards and the identification of generic competences. Such a framework could be developed at the European level and applied through national structures, delivered through flexible education and training systems, as well as self-regulated through a professional code of ethics governing the behaviour of youth workers in their contact with young people.

While there is no need for a homogeneous **training** system for youth workers, there is a need for a **competence**-building framework based on approaches to learning. Just as for young people themselves, youth workers need to engage in ongoing, lifelong learning in order to deal effectively with the changing circumstances in which they have to work.

Necessary resources need to be attached to the provision of flexible, appropriate and incremental training and there has to be a stronger **recognition** of youth work, both within and outside youth policy structures in order to secure the virtuous circle of quality, competence and improved practice. Key questions about usage, currency and credibility of competences need to be explored in platforms for dialogue with the different actors involved.

Exchange between youth workers and young people from different cultures, backgrounds and youth work experiences is important for quality development, for learning and support, for knowledge transfer and for extending opportunities for developing and implementing youth work at the international level. To improve networking and exchange, practitioners from across Europe in all sectors of youth work should have the means and opportunities for dialogue, contact and co-operation. There was also a call for stronger international **mobility** opportunities for youth workers. The Youth in Action Programme goes some way to address these issues, but they need to be taken further.

Last but not least, there is a strong imperative to develop a legal framework for youth work that ensures a core budget which guarantees the **sustainability** of infrastructure, projects and youth work development. There should be clear and transparent criteria for the funding of youth work; both established and new youth work initiatives and organisations should have equal chances of securing these resources. In the debate, national governments were held to be primarily responsible for the funding of youth work. European funds were viewed as playing an additional role in both the development and implementation of youth work.

The declaration stresses the common and proper responsibilities of all actors involved and is **addressed to 'whom it may concern'**. **But the focus lies on** the following:

- > **Young people themselves!**
- > **The youth work field!**
- > **Ministers responsible for youth for the 50 European countries present!**
- > **Relevant European institutions!**
- > **Political structures concerned with young people and youth work at national, regional and local level!**



Although the preparation helped us to foresee important messages, it still was hard to predict the content of the declaration. We did not dare imagine that we had anticipated things correctly. Much to our surprise a lot of what we thought was important also found its place in the declaration and hence was strengthened. The diversity of youth work was underlined as well as the importance of sustainable support of youth work; the discussions with regard to recognition of the competences of youth work; the importance of a European 'youth' programme, etc. Although there was not an in-depth debate about youth work and cross-sectorial co-operation, it did rise to the surface. But there again, we made use of existing knowledge and partnerships.

All these issues also found their way into the **'Resolution on Youth Work'** of the Council of Ministers of Youth, which the Belgian Presidency wrote based on the preparations for the convention. This resolution was presented by the Belgian Presidency on 14 July to the Youth Working Party, in preparation of the Council of Ministers of Youth. We also **asked all the member states to take into consideration the messages of the convention** and to reinforce the resolution with topics that had not yet been tackled.

Has nothing new been said? That is not even a relevant question. Having certain things said at an official European convention, by many youth workers and sharing balanced insights amongst everyone active in the field were more at the heart of the matter. And as always, important issues do show themselves.

Some resources

For more information on the 1st European Youth Work Convention: see www.youth-eutrio.be (English version) and choose programme, or photos or news (to see the movies).

For more information about the extra edition of *Coyote*, the organisations that contributed to the convention and relevant policy documents: see www.youth-eutrio.be (English version) and click on 'background information' where you find all relevant documents and publications.

Have you read the whole declaration? Enter the 1st European Youth Work Convention on www.youth-eutrio.be (English version) and click on 'download the declaration'.

The future of youth work in Europe

(Policy) Action Kit

The convention recognised the **responsibility of youth workers themselves** to contribute when they can to the several topics discussed, but they also need political and financial support. At the European level, there is a range of political initiatives and actions in the youth field taking place over the next year. The content of the declaration should be taken into account in those debates. The declaration is intended to encourage continued attention to youth work and young people within the policy debates, namely the debate that will inform the design of the future EU 'youth' programme and a new generation of programmes, as well as the Europe 2020 strategy and its flagship initiative 'Youth on the Move'. The **European Union, the Council of Europe and their member states, and the current and next trio presidencies of the EU** are invited to create an **agenda** and an **action plan**, and to provide the necessary **resources** for its realisation.

Furthermore the declaration can be used for **inspiration at national, regional and local level in all possible ways**: taking it to political meetings, organising discussions amongst youth workers and young people and actors involved, picking up an idea and elaborating on it by putting forward new approaches or reinforcing good practice. It would be great to have the declaration as a milestone, a touchstone for future policy and the progress that will be made, and as a frame of reference. But above all, it would be brilliant if the convention and declaration made it possible to ensure the present and future of youth work in Europe.

And as we started the 1st European Youth Work Convention, of course **we dream about a second, and a third, ...** as do the participants. This is only the beginning. And in future we would like to see a convention with many more youth workers present, enabling them to speak their mind to all actors involved, and making visible the fantastic work they do.