



# Youth work: global perspectives from South Africa and Quebec

By Sarah Farndale  
Photos courtesy of the interviewees



*Ubuntu. Ubuntu. Uuuubuuuntuuuu...*

It's a rich resonant word which sums up what – at least in South Africa – youth work is all about. *Ubuntu* is difficult to translate into English, however Nthuseng Mphahoele, from the South African delegation at the 2nd European Youth Work Convention explains that, roughly, it means “I am because of you”. *Ubuntu* is a beautiful and old concept. At its most basic, *Ubuntu* can be described as “human kindness”, but its meaning is much bigger in scope than that – it embodies the ideas of connection, community and mutual caring. Desmond Tutu described it as “the very essence of being human”. If you have *ubuntu* you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say: “My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.” “We belong in a bundle of life.” This, according to Nthuseng, is the attitude that youth work in South Africa takes; it is caring and it is kind, but it is then inherently informal. How does this perspective on youth work compare to the more European-centric one delegates heard about at the 2nd European Youth Work Convention? The convention brought together international delegations ready and hoping to share, learn and take back new practices to their countries while sharing some of their own with us. *Coyote* spoke to the delegations from Quebec, Canada and South Africa.



The Canadian delegation: Mark, Eva, Michelle and Tristan

Ms Mphahoele and her delegation were particularly keen to formalise some of the South African youth work practices. “There is a discipline as well as monitoring of youth work that we do not have to such a degree in South Africa – that is a key lesson that I will take back with me,” she commented. Of course the context that they are working in in South Africa is very different: “Here you have dedicated investment from institutions into youth work and youth workers. In South Africa they are just beginning to go down this path but there is still a long way to go... we are also not as advanced on training, standards and recognition.”

What was clear for both delegations was that these kinds of forums, conventions, conferences, networking opportunities – whatever you’d like to call them – do not exist to the same extent in Canada or in South Africa. Nthuseng continued: “There are not as many opportunities to share knowledge. I really value this about this convention; that it’s a place to network, make connections and share experiences, as well as to learn about new models of practice.” This sharing is something that will also continue back on the African continent. “We have a responsibility as the leading country in southern Africa when it comes to youth work: we must share best practice. South Africa also has the chair of the African Union and that is a good place to do this.”

The Quebecois were also rather envious of the opportunity to get together on such a scale. Mark, from Montreal, who works for Quebecois integrational youth services (helping to get young people into work) comments: “There are so many different councils and collaborative networks here in Europe – we don’t have that in Quebec. We don’t link up with other national or international councils or agencies. We work all by ourselves

on an island when it comes to youth policy and advocacy.” Tristan, who is co-ordinator of an association of 28 youth homeless shelters, adds: “Youth workers and youth organisations don’t really talk to each other! This is the first time I’ve met these guys and we work on the same level in the same city.” Michelle, who works in business development for Academos, a social network providing online guidance and mentorship for young people, agrees: “It really seems that there is a youth position here in Europe. You speak to governments as one voice. In Quebec we do not have this youth position. There’s no official national position coming from the ‘ground up’. We are (geographically) 55 times the size of Belgium, but have less people. And sadly the government wants to divide us – so this works well for them. If I meet with the Prime Minister – I will ask him to support my organisation – not youth as a whole.”

The delegation from Quebec are passionate about youth work and emotionally quite raw from recent events at home: rising anti-austerity student movements, mobilising against the government and the – very recent – abolition of one of the delegates, Eva’s, organisation, a state-run association helping to enhance youth participation, of which there were 17 agencies across Quebec. They all seem particularly impressed by what they see as the harmony of the European youth work scene. Eva explains: “Youth work is not something we address as a topic in Quebec. We work in silos – immigration, health care, urban issues, etc.” According to Mark this comes down to consensus on youth work in general and on best practice, “your voices speak more in unison, because you have more consensus”. They contend that the fact there is no ministry for youth and that youth issues are dealt with at local rather than national level significantly plays into this.



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## Common challenges

While South Africa may seem a world away from Europe both geographically and in terms of societal issues, we share a lot challenges when it comes to youth work and integration. Nthuseng comments: "South Africa is a real hub and has immigration from all over Africa and beyond. Therefore there is huge importance placed on fostering relationships between migrants, and between South Africans and immigrant communities." Youth work has a huge role to play here. The discussions held during the convention on bringing young people into youth organisations beyond those already involved also ring very true to her.

Both delegations were impressed by both the funding and the level of commitment from politicians when speaking about youth work. Nthuseng mentions: "Training and the level of investment in it and in youth work overall is a big concern for us." For the Quebecois, part of the problem is that young people themselves are not involved – as they have seen here in Europe – in advocacy on their own behalf. Tristan comments: "The only organisation that was doing that kind of lobbying by and for young people was the one Eva was working for that was just abolished! Now we are waiting on a national youth strategy. But the main focus of any youth policies – and funding – goes to employment and professional education." Youth work is the "Cinderella" factor when it comes to getting young people working!



Quebec



It's clear that the sharing of best practice should not, however, be a one-way street! And, given the chance, both delegations have a thing or two to tell us about what works well in their countries too. For Nthuseng a lot of the issues and challenges that she has been hearing about over the last few days, such as immigration, youth unemployment, exclusion, poverty and inequality are things that they have a lot of experience of dealing with – and that youth workers are on the front line of – in South Africa. She feels that Europe can learn a lot from what is going on elsewhere in the world.

If there's a slight criticism about the convention and the discussions that we've had here, it's that it's been at too much of a conceptual level. The international delegates felt that the real test will be to make sure the outcomes of the convention impact on the everyday life and work with young people. Will the results go both up to politicians and down to the grassroots? In Michelle's words: "We all got inspired here that this kind of event should happen in Quebec, or even at a national level in Canada. But before that happens I want to know: will it have an impact, or is it all just 'blah blah'?" Now there's a challenge that perhaps we can revisit at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention!



South Africa



Nthuseng Mphahoele