

Will youth work really change the world?
A conversation with Mayssoun Sukarieh

by Wout Van Caimere and Sarah Farndale

I met Mayssoun Sukarieh five minutes before she went on stage to deliver her keynote speech at the 2nd European Youth Work Convention. Coming from the United States, where she teaches at Brown University, she's jetlagged and a bit surprised by what she has heard over the last few days at the convention. She had hoped to find another discourse in Europe, but words such as empowerment, impact, indicators and participation fit in the dominant rhetoric on youth she describes in the book Youth Rising? The Politics of Youth in the Global Economy, co-authored by Stuart Tannock. Mayssoun is a bit nervous because what she's about to say opposes quite strongly what some of the other speakers have been saying on stage.



While Mayssoun uses the same buzzwords when it comes to youth work, she does not use them in such a positive light as we have been hearing from the other speakers. On participation, for example, she comments: “In 2003 and after the invasion of Iraq, there was a lot of money from the US to youth programmes in the Arab World, trying to pre-empt supposed radicalisation. There has been an NGO-isation of youth work that fits in with the NGO-isation of everything.”

Positive concepts such as “empowerment, participation and entrepreneurship” are the buzzwords of youth work, and they are fascinating concepts. Indeed, it is hard to tell what is wrong with them – who does not want youth empowerment or participation, for example? Who does not agree on youth leadership? Youth workers are taken in by the words. After a while, according to Maysoun, one starts to realise that despite the beauty of these concepts, there is something missing: Why participation? Why now? Participating in what? For whom? Leading what? Leading where? Empowering for what? And whose empowerment? If one does not analyse the rise of these concepts, and the concept of youth itself, in the context of the rise of neoliberalism as the only political economic model, then it is hard to see what is wrong with these words.

Take for example participation, Mayssoun explains that it rose to prominence with the withdrawal of the state, and each of us now has to participate to solve our own problems. The problem is, she says, that the state did not withdraw, it is still serving the elites of the society, it has been transformed from a welfare state to a security state, to monitor those who are most affected by the injustices of the neoliberal economy and create a safe space for corporate plunder. When you put the rise of “youth” as well as the NGO-isation of work in this context, then – Mayssoun believes – you start to understand why so much funding has been poured into youth empowerment, participation and leadership. We are asked to participate, contends Mayssoun, in our own oppression, to reproduce the injustices created by the neoliberal economy.

Mayssoun, through her own experience as a youth worker, believes that rather than furthering social justice, youth work in fact often does the opposite. After her undergraduate studies she spent three years as a social worker working with young people. “I started questioning why all the NGOs were focusing on young people and why all these funds started to flow to work with children and young people. I wondered why we were focusing so much on the community and on our capacity to solve our own problems. What happened to social justice as redistribution of wealth?”

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Youth employment and unemployment is really misrepresented all over the world.

Most of employment problems are the same for adults and youth.

Framing youth employment as youth unemployment promotes generation conflict rhetoric, and gives an argument for reducing social public budget for old people.

Illustration by Aline Rollin

Mayssoun poses challenging questions to the youth work sector. How can we focus on localisation, on community development? What happens if a young person is born in a poor community and another in a richer one? Why are we asking both of them to participate in solving their community problems? To focus on resources available in their respective communities? Are we not participating, as social workers, in the reproduction of poverty? "It was hard to point out the tyranny of these concepts," and she became rather disillusioned with the sector. "The work became a burden on me. I wanted to make a change. Forces around were stronger than our power as youth workers, we taught skills to youth in poor areas, very few could benefit, but nothing was changing, year after year you see how limiting the work is."

What she has come to realise now is that youth work has been most often focused on asking young people to develop certain skills to solve their own problems: to write a CV, to go through a job interview, to communicate, to speak publicly. Through the process of teaching these, the young people also learn that their problems will be

solved through learning these skills. They learn – Mayssoun thinks – that the system is fair and all they need to do is learn skills, and more skills, a lifelong learning process to find jobs that do not even exist in the labour market. They learn to internalise the problems of the system; they learn that they are responsible for their own problems, and they are responsible for solving them. They learn not to question structural problems that lead to a lack of jobs, inequalities and injustice. They learn that the 1% made their wealth because they are entrepreneurs, because they have the skills, not because of structural injustices.

"Why not teach young people to question the system? The system is not inclusive. Why not teach them to revolt, to ask for redistribution of wealth?" When it comes to the specifics of what skills might help young people to navigate the system, Mayssoun suggests that there is nothing wrong with the teaching of skills to youth, the problem is with just focusing on this level without encouraging them to question the whole system. "You also need to teach young people to think out of the box."



There is a growing conscience of youth in politic discourses.

Youth as a frame was generally used to describe social movements like Occupy, Arab Springs, Greece movements... even if young people were not the only group to be involved.

Framing these movements to youth is a way to reduce them, to limit them to youth matters.

Illustration by Aline Rollin

The convention had a real focus on individual stories of young people whose path was influenced by youth work. Mayssoun's path started in youth work and led to academia. How did her rhetoric end up so different to that of the youth workers we heard from during the rest of the convention? Mayssoun studied for her bachelor's degree in Beirut in the mid-1990s and that was when she got involved as a volunteer in an after-school programme, helping marginalised youth with their school work. This was when she started getting to know people in the NGO world and working in non-formal education. "We were very focused on community education and how everyone should help and volunteer to overcome our problems and build a stronger community," explains Mayssoun.

After a while she began to question this role. "Their parents were often unemployed and the focus on school was a luxury, because at some point they became an economic asset to their families. That meant they had to leave school. I wondered how I was to tell them that they shouldn't. I really struggled with the question of how we as individuals can solve all these problems and we can focus only on youth instead of the bigger picture of how the system functions."

Even so, as part of a network of NGOs in the Arab world providing non-formal education, "we had the idea that these little stories would form a stream into a river that will lead to change". After a while: "I saw

that more and more people were getting poorer and the privatisation of education was hitting the Arab world. We were contributing to the privatisation of education and the withdrawal of the state from the welfare system." She witnessed the replacement of the role of the state by that of NGOs and that set her on the path she is on today.

She is, however, positive about the future as she feels confident that people, especially young people, will always challenge and question the status quo; even more so when times are tough and people do not have jobs. Radical movements – she cites the student movement in Quebec and the campaigns in Chile against privatisation – have grown out of the current climate. Their success, according to Mayssoun, will be in connecting with other groups in society. Unfortunately, NGOs are now so ingrained in the system that change will not come from them she thinks, given that their very existence depends on the system that funds them. This problem is compounded by the fact that civil society is now only made up of NGOs; in the past political parties and unions made it stronger and richer.

The hope for young people to change their own lives comes down to themselves in the end, Mayssoun contends and, in order to achieve this, they need to question the system and this she feels confident they will do, with or without the help of youth workers and the "system".