

Report of the group interview held with council members of the European Youth Forum (EYF) at Management Center Europe in Brussels on Friday 27 April 2018.

1. Aim and methodology

The aim of the group discussion was to explore the role of voluntary youth organisations as educators/employers/organisers of volunteer and/or paid youth workers. The group consisted of ten people, as well as Tanya Basarad and Jim O'Donovan who acted as facilitators. A Youth Officer with the EYF also conducted a gender audit of the group discussion. The ten participants represented a variety of different youth organisations including trade union confederations, voluntary work groups, confederations of youth clubs, umbrella organisations for learning mobility and faith groups, as well as national youth councils and the EYF. They came from a reasonably broad spectrum of countries - Germany, the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Italy and Azerbaijan - and had on average some 10 years experience in the youth field, primary as participants and volunteers.

The duration of the group discussion was 1 hour and 22 minutes and was recorded. Each of the 10 participants were asked in turn to introduce themselves, how they became involved in youth work, what organisation they represented and their role/s in that organisation. The topics covered in the course of the group discussion focused on their motivation/expectations in becoming involved in youth work; the ethos/values of their organisation; the roles of youth workers in their organisation; the qualities and competences needed to be an effective youth worker; the roles of formal and non-formal education in acquiring these competences; and the ongoing training and supports required by youth workers. The group discussion followed the thematic structure described in the Appendix 1.

2. Observations and general conclusions

The following observations and general conclusions are based on an analysis of the group discussion.

- **Time and methodology:** The group discussion (recorded) lasted for 1 hour and 22 minutes. Some additional time could also have been used but the discussion was concluded because of the EYF programme schedule. The participations were engaged and responsive throughout, however they would have benefited from a briefing in advance on the nature and purpose of the discussion and the lead questions and themes. Accordingly, a certain amount of improvisation was necessary in facilitating the discussion.
- **Participating and contributing:** One of the issues emerging from the group discussion was the importance of contributing - "making an impact". The focus of much policy and practice in youth work is on what it *can do* for young people; what young people can do for themselves and others is perhaps less apparent. This desire "to make an impact", provides potentially fertile ground for the development of education and training paths for youth workers. However, there are other related issues, as outlined below, that may serve to impede this.
- **Voluntary youth organisations:** Self-realisation, altruism, mutual learning, support and endeavour, emerged from the group discussion as the defining features of voluntary youth work. There was little sense of broader policy issues, such as quality assurance or professionalisation. The focus was on the non-formal, space and freedom of action. In terms of support the focus was on the

inadequacy and precarious nature of financial support, but the relative importance of European support programmes was highlighted.

- **Education and training of youth workers:** One of the most striking features of the group discussion was the preference given to non-formal education and learning over formal education in terms of youth work. When asked which was the most important in terms of the training of youth workers, the participants not only saw non-formal education and training as preferential, but also saw formal qualifications as an adjunct rather than a necessity for youth workers.
- **Qualities/competences necessary in a youth worker:** For the group participants, personal qualities - "self-confidence", "dedication" - and interpersonal and communication skills were the most important.
- **Youth work as a career:** The group discussion gave little sense that participants would consider youth work a career option. On the contrary, youth work was often viewed as an intermittent stage in life - or at different stages in life - an adjunct to work and career where you could make a contribution to the well-being of young people and the improvement of society.

3. Analysis of the group discussion

The analysis follows the format of the group discussion and the lead questions and themes as set out in the Appendix. The record has not been fully transcribed, but relevant extracts from the record have been quoted where appropriate for illustrative purposes and to give a sense of the participants' responses, thoughts and feelings.

3.1 Motivation/expectation in joining a youth organisation.

The group participants involvement with and experience of youth work was largely determined by the organisation they participated in, the nature and role of the organisation and their roles therein. Their motivation to join a youth organisation and their expectations of such participation were characterised as personal, developmental and altruistic. There was, on the one hand, an expressed desire for personal development and fulfillment in participating in a youth organisation, a desire for "belonging", "variety", "discovering new opportunities and new ways of participating", "experiencing travel, exchanges, different cultures". But here was also a strong motivation and interest in "representing youth", "supporting others", "seeing people as role models", not only actively participating but "giving back to the organisation", "you can still give something and have some impact".

The focus of much policy and practice in youth work is on what it *can do* for young people, how it can develop their competences, enhance their societal and employment prospects and promote such issues as social inclusion, active citizenship and inter-cultural dialogue. This group discussion highlighted the fact that young people do not just have expectations of youth work but also have a desire to make contributions through youth work and that these expectations and contributions can be mutually supportive.

I was interested in representing youth and then I started being involved in voluntary youth work. It looked like the person before me had fun doing it and I said why not. It was not just the programme or activities of the organisation, but a more personal motivation to become involved.

When you are a child or a teenager and you are participating in some voluntary youth programme you see some models in other people and you want to become like them. You feel that you belong to the organisation and you want to give back to the organisation what it has given to you.

My organisation gave me the opportunity to go abroad. When I came back I wanted to stay in contact with the other people. I felt I was giving back. I was a contact for young people and host families. It was interesting to see how I could actually help them, if they had a problem, give them advice. I felt that I could make an impact even in a small way.

My first experience was an international youth exchange. I got the chance to travel, make friends, party. But even though it was a fun project, you can still give something and make an impact. My motivation now is that I can see the impact of the work I have done in the past five years. I see young people I have trained who are now youth volunteers in other organisations and this motivates me every day. I know I will come to the office and know that I will not do the same things as yesterday.

3.2 Participation in youth organisations

The group participants involvement in youth organisations varied considerably - from trade union confederations, voluntary work groups, confederations of youth clubs, umbrella organisations for learning mobility, to faith groups - and the nature and role of youth work in the participants countries was also apparent. The organisations had varied roles and functions, with a clear ethos and values such as "a spirit of social solidarity", "promoting non-formal education", "protecting the environment", and "advocating human rights". However, there were also more personalised and common values that pointed to the importance of individual experience, the need for self-expression and self-realisation, openness and solidarity, and supporting an open and free society.

There was a time when I was 17 or 18 and I was afraid to speak in public and I was nervous all the time. My organisation by providing a climate of openness and solidarity help me to deal with it and I wanted to do educational training. Self-confidence is one of the things you need to learn but you can only achieve it in a climate of solidarity and openness.

The spirit of social solidarity is one of the big value pillars in our organisation. Another is the importance of non-formal education. The values of the organisation were one of the first things I learnt when I joined.

In our local youth organisation there were definitely values that united people. This was the only place I could hear different opinions. For me it was the only place that I could feel free. What united the group of young people there was the freedom. We were free to talk, free to move, free to do whatever we want and that was something that united us. In local organisations you can feel the values even more.

Every person has something special to give to society. Everyone has a role to play in creating a better society for everyone else.

In terms of supports for youth organisations, at either local, national or European level, the group participants focused on the precarious nature of funding supports, but did point to the importance and relevance of European support programmes. However, there was little sense of the supportive role that policy and good practice can play.

For us the European funding is much more important than the national funding most of the time.

What's special about European funds is that it gives you much more space to think about what you want to do. Each organisation can choose what it wants to do.

3.3 The role of youth workers in youth organisations.

While the participants all agreed on the important role of youth workers in youth organisations - "the role of youth worker in our organisation is vital...the role is crucial at both national and local level" - there were different views on what a youth worker was and the role they play. Youth workers in the group participants' youth organisations appear to be mainly voluntary, some of them being full-time educators doing youth work in a voluntary capacity. The multiplying effect of such programmes as the Training of Trainers in providing training for youth worker was also commented upon. For some participants, youth work involved a strong sense of personal commitment, mutual learning and support and endeavour on the part of youth workers that distinguished them from others working with young people.

When considering the qualities and characteristics necessary in an effective youth worker, the participants emphasised the importance of inter-personal and communication skills: "empathy", "dedication", "people management skills", "listening", "being able to see the potential in every young person", "light passion in others", "being a warm person", as well as "self-confidence" and "effective public speaking".

Participants also cited the importance of non-formal learning, in contrast to formal learning, in fostering these qualities and acquiring the relevant competences.

In considering the ongoing on-the job or in-house training of youth workers and their retention, participants pointed to the need for "space and time to tackle issues". Concerns about transition from participant to volunteer and the disruptive nature of intermittent participation - due to other family and career commitment - were also raised; yet the relative longevity of participation in youth work at different life stages was also highlighted. Burn-out, poor pay and lack of job security, and inadequate supports as well as lack of recognition of competences acquired through youth work were also cited as impediments for youth workers. Accordingly, there was also little sense of participants wanting to pursue a career in youth work.

Youth workers in our organisation are vital. The people on the board are all youth workers with a lot of experience and have a lot of experience in what they are doing. Our secretariat also has a background in youth work. We have a lot of educators as volunteer youth workers who also train volunteer youth workers. We also get people from outside the organisation to do in-house training.

For me the activist is someone who has a stable job and who sometimes likes doing projects when he has time. For me a youth worker is a person who has decided to dedicate a certain period of his life to young people. For me activism is a hobby that you do sometimes, but youth work is something you take responsibility for and dedicate some part of your life for this.

What I think makes a good youth worker is attitude. You hire attitude not skills. You can teach people skills but not attitude.

When you participate in a youth organisation when you are young it shapes you into having certain characteristics and skills that make you a good youth worker. If I did not have this participatory phase in my life I would not have become a good youth worker. Just by participating gave me much more than just training.

Most of the people I have met became involved from desire. I don't even know if you would study for this.

I know people involved in voluntary youth work that are now studying to be a teacher or studying the social sciences. Afterwards you are passionate to learn more.

Don't see myself as working in my organisation for more than four years.

To be honest, I am studying educational science, and I think that you can learn youth work from non-formal education. You are going to a youth centre and you are meeting a youth worker as a teenager, you are getting in touch with a youth worker, you are meeting him, getting to know him. You don't follow a structured educational process. You can learn in a non-formal context in a structured way. I learnt more through non-formal education than through formal education. I did a course in youth work and all the participants agreed that we learnt more from our trainer than from the content of the course. You are learning by seeing and by doing.

We offer the space for youth workers to share experiences and tackle issues. We also offer them the space to constantly improve and develop their skills and getting to know how others do things.

I have been a youth worker for a number of years and for me it has been more like a part of my life where I was discovering myself, what I like/don't like, what I am good at and maybe not so good at. Youth work helped me discover myself. If there was a faculty where you could study youth work, in my case I don't think I would choose it because for me youth work is not so official, something without frames or limit, it is something free that we can discover.

Appendix

The educational paths of youth workers: Focus group with European Youth Forum

Introduction and background (approx. 20 mins)

Set out the purpose and aims of the study and the actors involved. Outline the questions asked and responses received and the data analysis undertaken.

Indicate the purpose of holding this focus group.

Briefly outline the timeline for the focus group and the leading questions. Indicate that the session is being recorded and what will result from the session.

- Ask each participant to introduce themselves and how they became involved in youth work; what organisation they represent or participate in and their role/s in this organisation.

Explore participants initial involvement in youth work and youth organisations (approx. 20 mins)

- What motivated you to become involved in youth work?
- What were your expectations of such involvement?
- What do you feel youth work can give you that no other form of education or training can give you?
- How does your experience of youth work differ from other learning experiences, both formal and non-formal?

Youth organisations (approx. 20 mins)

- Do you feel that your organisation has a strong vision/ethos/sense of purpose, and how important are these?
- Do you feel that your organisation is effectively supported - policy-wise, financially - at local or central government level?
- Does your youth organisation participate in EU/CoE funded programmes, and if so what do you think their impact has been?
- How would you describe the characteristics of a good youth organisation?

The role of youth workers in youth organisations (approx. 30 mins)

- What kind of youth workers - volunteers, youth leaders, professional youth workers - have you most experience of in your organisation and are their identifiable differences between them?
- How does your organisation support youth workers/volunteers in terms of their on-going training and development?
- What do you think, from your experience, are the most important qualities in a good youth worker?
- What are the particular competences and skills that are needed in a good youth worker?
- What do you think the relationship between a young person and a youth worker should be?
- Would you be motivated to become a youth worker/volunteer?
- Would you consider youth work to be a viable career option?

Experience of youth work (approx. 20 mins)

From your experience of youth work

- Have your expectations of what it could do for you been realised ?
- What things in particular do you feel have not lived up to expectations?
- What do you think could have been done better at organisational, local, national and European level?
- How do you think youth workers/volunteers could be better prepare and supported?