

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



Journeys to a New Life Understanding the Role of Youth Work in Integrating Young Refugees in Europe Expert Seminar

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Policy Paper

Situation of Young Refugees in Europe

In the last couple of years, and for the first time since World War II, Europe has been facing an unprecedented inflow of migrants and refugees. This reality brings new challenges that call for cross-sector integrated responses, where youth work has a key role in promoting inclusion, integration and social cohesion in the short, medium and long term.

From January until September 2015, Europe had an increase in refugee numbers¹ from 3.075,200 to 4.391,400.² Turkey is the 2014-2015 major refugee-hosting country in Europe (and worldwide).³ In the EU-28, more than four in five (83 %) of the first-time asylum seekers in 2015 were less than 35 years old and those aged 18–34 years represented slightly more than half (53 %) of the total number of first time applicants. Nearly 29% (3 in 10 applicants) were minors - less than 18 years old. This age distribution was common in almost all the EU member States. Therefore, the development of solutions for the inclusion and integration of young refugees should be a priority for authorities, international organisations and civil society, particularly for the youth work sector.

Many of the refugees and migrants fleeing to Europe from armed conflicts, mass killings, persecution and all different kinds of violence (including sexual and gender-based violence) travel to Turkey, from where they undertake life risking journeys by sea to Greece. From there, they try to make their way through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria to reach their destination countries, that include Germany and Sweden.⁴

The journeys are dangerous as they face extortion and exploitation, border closures, lack of housing and health support and some groups such as single women and unaccompanied children, are among those who are particularly vulnerable and that require a co-ordinated and efficient protection response.⁵ UN agencies such as UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), UN Women and UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), together with different

¹ Including refugees and "people in refugee-like situation"

² UNHCR report [Global trends, forced displacement in 2015](#) (page 14)

³ *Idem* (page 15)

⁴ UNHCR, UNFPA and Women's Refugee Commission "[Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis - Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia](#)"

⁵ *Idem*

governments and civil society organisations, have been providing the humanitarian emergency response but there is also the need to reflect and create solutions for faster inclusion and integration.

At European level, the Council of Europe and the European Union have taken concrete decisions and actions to respond to the humanitarian situation and to start working on inclusion and integration, including specific initiatives focused on young refugees.⁶

There is an ongoing reflection on how to promote a more co-ordinated and efficient integration of young migrants and refugees. Themes such as integration in the schooling system, access to labour market, inclusion and participation in public life, are amongst the key issues that need to be tackled together by different stakeholders to contribute for a long-term integration of these young people. Youth work providers have a key role in this context as they have the capacity to read and adjust quickly to new realities, a longstanding experience in working towards inclusion and diversity in societies and the capacity to put forward innovative ideas that link knowledge, policy and practice.

Youth Work with Young Refugees

The youth work sector in Europe is very diverse and it has always been challenging to define it and its specificities. There is a broad spectrum of youth related activities and opportunities, and the understanding of what is youth work also changes depending on who provides it. When we think about youth work and young refugees, it is even more challenging to define it, because it is also related with the context where it takes place – transit or hosting country, for example – and the status of the young person. However, something that does exist in common in all that diversity is the human rights approach and the promotion of values based activities.

Young refugees and asylum seekers face multiple challenges, the refugee experience itself, their personal development and their process of inclusion and integration in the new society. Youth work has been challenged to contribute to solutions to address the needs and aspirations of young refugees. Its longstanding record of practices and experiences in working with marginalised young people (including migrant, minority and disadvantaged economic and social backgrounds) it is a good starting point for the development of initiatives to promote long-term inclusion of these young people. There are already existing good practices in youth work in including young refugees. We should share them widely and we can make better use of these practices for the inclusion and integration of young refugees.

Youth work providers were engaged in mobilisation of volunteers and promoted initiatives to deal with the humanitarian situation during the 2015 summer in different parts of Europe (such as in Greece) – for example, by collecting and providing clothes and food. On a more medium and long-term approach, many youth work actors are already engaged in providing language classes and organising culture courses (both for young asylum seekers/refugees and for hosting communities), as a first step to facilitate inclusion and strengthen bonds with local communities. Furthermore, youth work has been having a key role in fighting hate speech and contributing for the promotion of a positive narrative towards migrants and refugees.

Despite the capacity of response and quality work provided by the youth sector so far, we need to take into consideration that young refugees and unaccompanied minors bring new realities and that youth work providers need to be aware and prepared to deal with different needs, including the ones related with eventual mental health challenges. These situations are a result of traumatic events that may have affected both physical and mentally these young people. The absence of family and community networks to support them, plus the difficulties in dealing with transnational

ties with relatives that might still be in a challenging situation, puts additional pressure on these young refugees and asylum seekers. Furthermore, being in a “waitinghood”⁷ situation also affects their well-being and it is important to have solutions during this period that tackle personal development and mental health, independently of the decision regarding their status. 'Waitinghood' can have important consequences for migrant's physical and mental health and wellbeing as well as for their inclusion in society. It is also important that these young people could participate in activities outside the centres, to interact with the local communities and contribute to the change of narrative towards refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.

Many times, the needs and aspirations of these young people are not taken into consideration while programming. It is not the same to actively engage young refugees in the decisions that affect them or to have civil society organisations doing their best to represent their interests. Youth work sector is experienced in promoting human rights and citizenship education and in creating spaces for participation and joint decision-making. These experiences are key to engage young refugees as actors for change.

Programming for youth work remains a challenge while working with young refugees, due to uncertainty of the length of the intervention and participation of some young people, to the cultural and background differences, the difficulty in reaching some profiles (mainly young women), inefficient coordination between different actors and due to the lack of structural resources (such as staff and funding for programmes).

New Areas to Explore

The valuable practices and experiences of youth work in intercultural and non-formal education, social inclusion, peer support, soft and life skills development and other areas, is certainly an important piece of the puzzle when talking about the contribution of youth work in the integration of young refugees. But the sector has also been engaged in initiatives that go beyond its traditional added value and role and this calls for adequate policy framework and support to youth work to be able to contribute for the inclusion and integration of young refugees.

Based on the analytical papers and subsequent discussions that took place during the seminar, it is possible to identify some new areas that should be further explored such as: working with young asylum seekers during the waitinghood process; capacity-building of youth workers; youth work in humanitarian context; cross-sectoral cooperation; and participation of young refugees.

A key message that came out of this seminar is that the work towards the inclusion of these young people need to start in the very first day of arrival and that the youth work sector is ready to assume its role in this process. Therefore, it is important to create the necessary conditions for youth workers to reach the reception and transit centres where this young people are and provide services that support them through the waitinghood process. Promotion of leisure and sports activities, as well as of healthy lifestyles from a harm reduction perspective (e.g. working behaviours towards alcohol and drug abuse); and education on sexual and reproductive rights have been identified as programmatic priorities for youth work during waitinghood.

Youth work has a role in the inclusion of young refugees but there are also concrete training needs of the sector, as working with young refugees and asylum seekers imply knowledge and skills in dealing with trauma and conflict management. Training for youth workers on these issues is crucial. Learning from other sectors such as the humanitarian NGOs and international organisations experienced in migration and refugees' issues should be promoted.

⁷ Refers to the (often extended) waiting period that an applicant goes through until there is a decision regarding his/her legal status.

Youth workers in Europe are dealing with realities that were not usually part of their work. This is happening because some entities, including governments, are also not fulfilling their mandate and assuming responsibilities. It is not the role of youth work to welcome and facilitate the registration process of migrants and refugees. It is crucial to clarify mandates of different actors involved, that will allow more efficient and coordinated action towards inclusion and integration of young refugees.

Cross-sectoral cooperation is key for efficient solutions. It is important that it happens based on a humanitarian understanding of the situation, instead of securitising the issue, as this last option will not create the necessary conditions to develop long-term solutions. After providing immediate aid, access to the schooling system and labour market is key for the integration of these young people. Local governments, schools, youth work sector and other actors are encouraged to work closely. Recent experiences show us that youth work can support towards integration in the labour market through the development of life and vocational skills (e.g. in Turkey) and in the schooling system by preparing teachers, students, families and young refugees for the integration process, through non-formal education (e.g. in Greece).

“Nothing about us, without us” has been for many years a motto of the European youth movement, it makes sense to recall it when we talk about inclusion and integration of young refugees in Europe. The youth work sector has large experience in promoting policy dialogue initiatives and creating spaces for participation. The youth work as a political role as advocate and watchdog, to hold decision-makers and organisations more accountable on the impact that their decisions have. Now it is time to make use of these good practices and put them at the service of young refugees, to make their voice heard and promote a sense of belonging and citizenship. It is important to understand their needs and aspirations and to support self-developed and young refugee led initiatives.

“How far can youth work go?” will probably remain a question for many researchers, practitioners and policy makers in the upcoming years. The sector is frequently pressured to do everything and there is an ongoing discussion if it should stick to its added value and traditional role or if circumstances demand something new. One thing is certain, in the current situation, youth work must play its role in keeping Europe united in its diversity, fighting hate crime and promoting human rights.

Key messages

The key messages identified during the seminar, differentiated by theme, are listed below (in bold) and followed by a short explanation.⁸

Inclusion Programmes for Young Asylum Seekers/Refugees and Hosting Communities

- **Work for inclusion since the first day** – It is important to work with every person since the first day of arrival, no matter of how her/his process will evolve. Participants highlighted the need of working towards inclusion since the very beginning so the young refugees gain knowledge, skills and attitudes that would serve them in any future context. To learn the hosting language together with development of communication skills was identified as a priority.
- **Youth work can contribute to other inclusion initiatives** – There are already existing good practices in youth work and further initiatives can be developed in the following areas: delivery of language courses; organisation of culture courses (both for young asylum seekers/refugees and for hosting communities); development of life and vocational skills and intercultural dialogue competences; supporting initiatives of legal literacy; promotion of healthy lifestyles

⁸ For [more information](#) on the background of the seminar and the methodology to identify the key messages

from an harm reduction perspective (e.g. working behaviours towards alcohol and drug abuse); education on sexual and reproductive rights; sports & recreation; and citizenship and human rights education.

- **Engage local communities in inclusion programmes** – Youth work and young people are well positioned to assure the engagement of local communities in inclusion programmes. The participation of local communities is key to success.

Youth Work in Transit and Hosting Countries

- **Acknowledge vision and aspirations of young refugees** – It is important to be aware of the needs and aspirations of young refugees and to reconcile those by actively involving them in the development, implementation and evaluation of initiatives.
- **Promote appropriate solutions for different situations** - Youth workers need to be aware that there are different beneficiary needs and competences to be developed also during waitinghood and in transit situations, in addition to the traditional transition to adulthood that young refugees undergo as any young person does.
- **Take into consideration the diverse background of beneficiaries while programming** – status and age are important to take into consideration while programming; as well as prior experiences and cultural background of young refugees. Attention should also be given to gender and LGBT issues.
- **Be aware of your mandate and capacity to contribute** - Youth work has a role in assuring short but also medium and long term solutions, within its mandate. It is important that youth work providers are aware of the needs and their capacity, expertise and resources available to promote appropriate and efficient solutions. In addition, it is key that youth work sector counts with the support of governments and work cross-sectorally with other actors, including, but not limited to, humanitarian aid organisations, health care providers, schools etc.

Support for Self-Developed Initiatives

- **Promote peer-to-peer approach between young refugees** - It is important to involve young refugees as role models for their peers in the initiatives - they can work as project leaders and mentors and they can motivate others to become active.
- **Change the narrative about young refugees** - There is the need to support the change of narrative about (young) refugees, giving visibility to positive examples. These stories and case studies should be widely shared with the support of ICT tools and media. In addition, it is important to use communication tools easily available to young refugees.
- **Create spaces for participation of young refugees** – Youth work has a role in promoting bottom-up initiatives of young refugees, especially at the community level. These initiatives are key for personal empowerment and community development – and to see young refugees as actors for change.
- **Support self-developed initiatives by young refugees** – Initiatives promoted by young refugees should be supported to become sustainable and visible. Youth work can have a role in supporting the step-up of organisations (registration, development of statutes) and its further development (access to funds, volunteer management).
- **Initiate outreach programmes to young refugee women and inactive groups** – participants agreed that while involving young women in youth work is challenging, additional efforts should

be made to integrate them in activities and put in place necessary supporting mechanisms that would allow for their participation and development.

Capacity-building and Support to Youth Workers

- **Create learning opportunities for youth workers** - There is a need to improve skills of youth workers on new issues for the sector such as trauma, conflict management, legal actors and frameworks, religious freedom and gender & migration.
- **Promote exchange initiatives** – Within youth work and with external stakeholders working with young refugees.
- **Make better use of existing funding opportunities** - Youth work should look at Erasmus+ chapter for capacity-building of youth workers as an opportunity to fund initiatives; as young migrants and refugees are clearly identified as programme priority for 2017.
- **Access to structural funding for youth organisations should be secured** – Youth organisations need improved access to funds available to work with young refugees, beyond project-based opportunities.

Advocacy Work by Youth Organisations with Young Refugees

- **Invest in citizenship education of young refugees** - Youth work has a role in citizenship education and awareness raising about young refugee rights at local, national and regional levels. It is important that these young people become aware of the existing practices on democratic participation and how to get engaged.
- **Assure spaces for dialogue between different stakeholders** – Linking bottom-up initiatives with spaces that allow the participation of young refugees in public life and decision/policy-making is essential to make the voice of young refugees heard. This link is key to go beyond personal empowerment and community development and to be able to promote systemic change.
- **Promote a youth rights approach** – Young refugees are marginalised youth and there is the need to assure their access to rights. The work of several stakeholders, including humanitarian actors, sometimes lacks this perspective of young people in transition from childhood to adulthood. There is significant youth research and youth work experience on this issue to support advocacy initiatives.
- **Work with the media to advocate for young refugees' rights** – Advocacy work should involve collaboration with the media, to produce accurate and knowledge based information and to change the narrative about young refugees.

Role of Youth Work in Strengthening Accountability

- **Rediscover the political voice of youth work** - Youth work should rediscover its political voice, challenge systems and hold decision-makers and organisations more accountable on the impact their decisions have. Youth organisations should increase their watchdog function particularly on the rights and realities of young refugees across Europe.
- **Needs and responsibilities should be clarified** – Refugee-targeting initiatives must respond to needs and every actor involved (such as governments, local public authorities and humanitarian organisations) need to assume their share of responsibilities. Situations where the NGO sector

stepped in to carry out the state responsibilities should be limited to ensure appropriate legal protection and respect of relevant international conventions.

- **Improve public-private partnerships** - There is the need for accountable contracts in public-private partnerships related with hosting and management of young refugees. Contracting regulations should include principles and practices that respect the rights of young refugees.

Research and Practice Coming Together

- **Reinforce co-operation** - Co-operation between youth sector actors should be reinforced (researchers, practitioners and policy makers).
- **Recognise the role of research** - Research is important to assess the needs and understand the reality; to contribute to the systematisation of youth work experiences, further theorisation/modelling and development of tools; and to support evidence-based policies.
- **Develop research focused on youth policy makers** - There is the need to develop research focused on youth policy makers. for example, on how do they understand and experience the context and the decision-making process.
- **New themes for further research** – Participants identified the need to further explore new research themes such as: waitinghood, mental health, young refugee women’s non-participation, unaccompanied minors, young refugees’ aspirations and reality, power relations and concept of whiteness.
- **Promote participatory methods** – Researchers should consider participatory methods in their work, with the objective to further engage young refugees in their research projects.

Added Value of Youth Work and Cross-Sector Approaches

- **The role of youth work in inclusion and integration of young refugees should be recognised** - Youth work has a longstanding experience in promoting inclusion of marginalised youth (including with disadvantaged and migrant background) and there are already existing good practices in including young refugees. We should share them widely and we can make better use of these practices for the inclusion and integration of young refugees.
- **Involve youth work taking into consideration its specific added-value** - Youth work actors are educational providers, used to promote non-formal education and informal learning opportunities, intercultural dialogue initiatives and work based on a peer learning and co-developmental approach that are key for successful inclusion programmes.
- **Improve co-ordination between inclusion and integration actors** - There is the need for better co-ordination of actors working in the inclusion and integration of young refugees, especially between youth work providers, local public authorities and humanitarian organisations.
- **Promote strategic partnerships and multidisciplinary teams** – Collaboration efforts that bring together research, policy and practice and that allow contextualisation and needs-based programmes and activities, should be promoted, especially within youth work sector. In addition, synergies between non-formal and formal education settings and work in multidisciplinary teams should be encouraged.