

Youth Partnership

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



Preliminary results of the study Mapping European youth work ecosystems

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by

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Introduction

Following the Council of Europe's Recommendation on youth work¹ and the 3rd European Youth Work Convention in 2020, a process of implementing the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA) was set in motion. According to the EU Council Resolution the EYWA "is a strategic framework for strengthening and developing quality and innovation in, and recognition of youth work"². Both the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030 call for the development of a European Youth Work Agenda.

At European level, several actors – institutions, organisations, agencies, individuals – address issues associated with the EYWA and thus contribute to its implementation. The aim of the study "Mapping European Youth Work Ecosystems" is to depict the diversity of actors and their initiatives and highlight thematic overlaps on the one hand and thematic gaps on the other. In doing so, the study contributes to further development of youth work at the European level.

Mid-term between the 3rd and the 4th European Youth Work Conventions in 2020 and (expected) 2025 respectively, this paper is a first summary of what we call the European youth work ecosystem, i.e., the complex network of actors - institutions, organisations, agencies, individuals – at European level, which contribute to the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda. The study explicitly focussed on European actors and networks of actors who connect themselves to European policy discussions on youth work. National, regional and local level actors and developments are not taken into account.

This paper presents a short summary of the study and focuses on the main European actors and the expectations towards them rather than on their projects, their cooperation and interactions. The authors invite the participants of the Symposium to discuss the content of the paper in a workshop and thus contribute to the further development of a visualisation and description of the European youth work ecosystem.

Before turning towards the contents of the study, a short introduction to the methodology is given.

Methodology

In order to describe, visualise and analyse the European youth work ecosystem, a three-step methodology was developed. In the first step, desk research was conducted and information on projects and actors related to the European Youth Work Agenda was collected (September – November 2022).

¹ [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2017\)4 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe](#)

² Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda 2020/C 415/01 EUR-Lex - 42020Y1201(01) - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)

Methodology



In parallel to the desk research, the members of the [European Steering Group on the European Youth Work Agenda](#) (hereinafter: the European Steering Group) were invited for interviews. These semi-structured open interviews (December 2022 – January 2023) gave an overview of which actors are active in the field, which projects are implemented, what the actors expect from each other and how they interact with each other. In a second round of interviews (January 2023), further actors identified by the members of the European Steering Group as relevant for the implementation were interviewed.

Furthermore, observations took place at related events, e.g. the [Visible Value Seminar](#) "Strengthening the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda in Eastern and Southeast Europe" of the Youth Partnership (November 2022 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as the meetings of the European Steering Group (July 2022 and January 2023 in Brussels, Belgium).

The information gathered from these data collection methods was analysed through the method of content analysis. The results of the analysis are discussed in several validation rounds with the individual persons interviewed, the European Steering Group as a whole, as well as through a validation workshop at the [Symposium "Visible Value: growing youth work in Europe"](#), May 2023 in Budapest, Hungary.

This paper is structured in four sections. [First](#), different visions of European actors towards the European Youth Work Agenda are presented. The [second section](#) describes the European youth work ecosystem, which is visualised in [figure 1](#). The [third section](#) then discusses the actors, their roles in the implementation of the EYWA, and the projects they have initiated. The expectations of the actors are also discussed. Finally, the [fourth section](#) draws some conclusions and raises questions for discussion.

1. What is the European Youth Work Agenda

From the point of view of the members of the European Steering Group, the European Youth Work Agenda was born out of previous processes set in motion by the two institutions - the European Union and the Council of Europe. For a long time, a lack of synchronisation was observed, wherein the Council of Europe and the European Commission doing similar work in relation to youth work, but separately from each other. Processes such as the previous youth work conventions from 2010 and 2015 and the Council of Europe Recommendation on youth work (2017) led to a convergence. The reflection on these processes shows a difference in the way the Agenda was seen by those more associated with the European Commission and those

associated with the Council of Europe; while for the former the agenda, being referred to as the EU Council Resolution of 2020, often stood out as a major achievement, for the latter the Agenda, being the Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention in 2020, was more often seen as one of various milestones in a much longer process, albeit an important one.

When asked about their understanding of the European Youth Work Agenda, most stakeholders represented in the European Steering Group clearly see it as a framework with a guiding character that contributes to reaching a common understanding of youth work in Europe. Having a guiding character, most interviewees pointed out the non-mandatory nature of the final declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention. As such, the Agenda is not something that needs to be implemented. Rather, its value lies in the Agenda providing space to different stakeholders to discuss and acknowledge issues, agree on joint priorities and set a common direction for the future of European youth work. This seems however to contradict the wording of the EU Council Resolution, which clearly defines the Resolution as a framework for implementing the European Youth Work Agenda, with the process of implementation being called the Bonn Process. Stakeholders point out that these different wordings and understandings contribute to ambiguity surrounding the European Youth Work Agenda. To what extent this ambiguity is merely a linguistic rather than a discursive difference, as was pointed out by one of the interviewees, remains to be discussed.

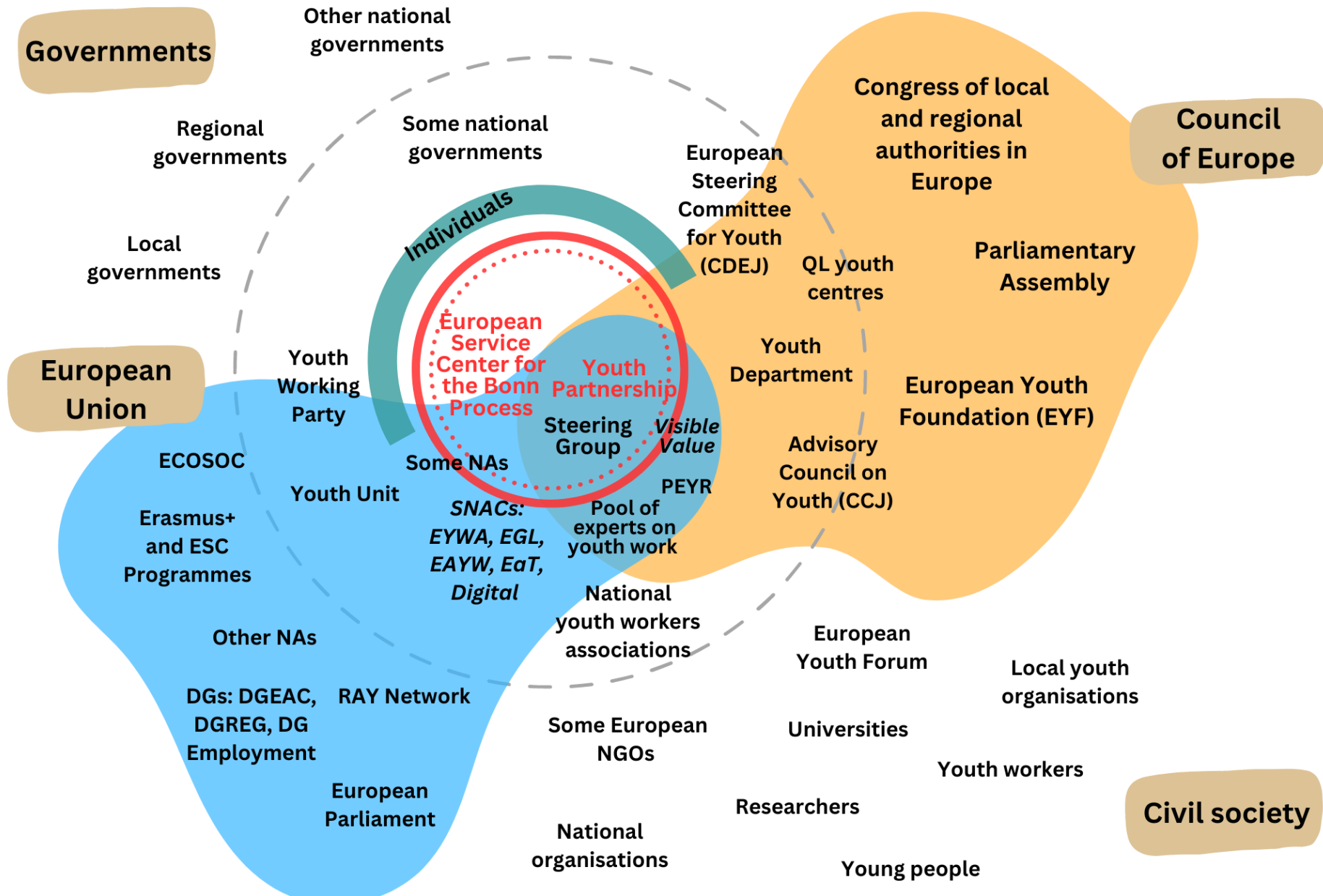
The non-mandatory, guiding character of the Agenda, and its lacking mechanisms of implementation and evaluation, make the Agenda something that is “good to be involved in”, but not necessarily something that policy-makers have to work on. This lack of commitment, which many stakeholders ascribe both to the two European institutions as well as national governments, is accompanied by an attested lack of ownership from the youth work community of practice. While there seems to be an agreement that the agenda should be based on the needs and interests of youth workers, some of the interviewees questioned the level to which they have been involved in the design and implementation of the Agenda so far.

With the differences and ambiguities in definition and reason for the agenda, it makes sense to take a closer look at the European youth work ecosystem.

2. The European Youth Work Ecosystem

The visualisation of the European Youth Work Ecosystem presented here is based on the information gathered by the authors through interviews with the members of the European Steering Group, various large international NGOs present at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, and observations made by the authors of the study at various European conferences and meetings of the European Steering Group. The data is further supplemented and discussed through various validation rounds, the last of which is the presentation of the visualisation at the [symposium "Visible Value: Growing youth work in Europe"](#).

Visualisation of the existing ecosystem



The diagram shows an ecosystem consisting of several groups of actors and several rings of involvement. The four groups of actors are the two European institutions, i.e. the European Union and the Council of Europe, the governments and civil society. Within each of these groups of actors, there are institutions, organisations and actors which follow the European Youth Work Agenda more closely and those who do not. They are organised along three circles, representing their level of involvement.

At the core of the ecosystem are the **Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth** (hereafter: Youth Partnership) as a cooperation between the two European institutions, the **European Steering Group for the European Youth Work Agenda** established by it, as well as the **European Service Center for the Bonn Process**, located within JUGEND für Europa, the German National Agency for Erasmus+ Youth and Sport and the European Solidarity Corps.

A second circle shows actors who explicitly dedicate and attribute (part of) their work to the Agenda. Besides parts of the two international institutions, such as the respective youth departments as well as their committees in which member states and international non-governmental organisations meet, these are also some national governments as well as national youth worker associations. According to the interviewees, some individuals also play a prominent role in the development and implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda.

The outer rim is finally formed by civil society organisations, governments and the organs of the Council of Europe and the European Union, which may show an interest in the European Youth Work Agenda, sometimes due to commitments made in European youth policy coordination structures, but are not necessarily committed to carrying out specific actions.

3. The ecosystem: actors, roles and projects

Following this rather general visualisation of the European youth work ecosystem, the following section describes the actors in more detail, giving particular attention to the roles of and expectations towards the actors, as well as some examples of projects they implement in the framework of the European Youth Work Agenda.

The European institutions

If we now take a closer look at the groups of actors - and consequently their role and their measures and activities - the **European Union** (more specifically the **European Commission**) and the **Council of Europe** are named as the most important stakeholders of the European Youth Work Agenda, along with bodies and institutions that are part of, or associated with them. These two institutions are credited with the will to establish a common Agenda in order to synchronise their efforts in the field of youth work, thus preventing further overlaps and competition. However, at the same time, their work appears to be limited, or so it is perceived by the interviewees, to designing a digital youth work platform (European Commission) and reviewing the Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work (Council of Europe) as well as participation in the European Steering Group and events regarding the European Youth Work Agenda. This fuels criticism that both institutions have largely withdrawn their visible commitment when adopting the Agenda and have handed over their initially active role to the Youth Partnership.

As a partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe, the **Youth Partnership** is attributed the main coordinating role for the agenda. It creates the context in which everything related to the Agenda - on the European level - is happening. However, in the eyes of the interviewees, it has taken time for the Partnership to take on and grow in this role. Nowadays, the Youth Partnership is attributed having an overview of the implementation process on European level by organising events (e.g. Visible Value Seminar), commissioning the development of support materials and research (e.g. Youth Knowledge book on youth work strategies; Study on cross-border recognition of youth workers skills and competences; analytical paper analysing youth work policy), sharing information, and supporting initiatives of the two partner institutions. However, there is a widespread belief that the Partnership has very limited resources and that with the current capacities, it is not able to live up to its potential. Accordingly, the **European Steering Group on the European Youth Work Agenda**, which was set up by the Youth Partnership in early 2022 to advise it, is seen as the only place where at least some degree of coordination between European actors takes place.

Looking at the European Union, the main concern is that the EU's involvement is concentrated on the Youth Unit within the DGEAC of the European Commission. Some other bodies of the European Union, such as the DGs for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DGEMPL), Regional and Urban Policy (DGREGIO) and Education and Culture (DGEAC, apart from the already involved Youth Unit) in the European Commission, but also the European Parliament, are considered to be of great importance. An engagement of these bodies could bring the agenda a decisive step forward. While there is awareness that the complexity of the European Union and its structures is a challenge for its greater involvement, there is some level of agreement that the implementation process would be very different if the European Commission would use its influence and decision-making power for the Agenda.

Similarly, a greater and more visible involvement of the Council of Europe is desired, although it is acknowledged that its main bodies, the European Steering Committee for Youth, the Advisory Council on Youth and the Joint Committee on Youth, are actively involved in the European Youth Work Agenda. For the Council of Europe, it is argued that compared to the European Commission, it has very few resources at its disposal to be actively involved in the Agenda. The different perceptions of the EU and the Council of Europe on the European Youth Work Agenda, as already presented in [section one](#), can be seen again here: asked about the involvement of the two institutions in the Agenda, the involvement of the Council of Europe is more often seen in relation to its Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on Youth Work, which is perceived more as the main policy guidelines for the organisation's work on this topic, in contrast to the Agenda, which is perceived as more related to the European Commission.

Meanwhile, the network of the Quality Label youth centres coordinated by the Council of Europe is perceived as a structure that is involved in the implementation of the Agenda to some extent. Some of the centres been cooperating more closely since the 3rd European Youth Work Convention and have set up various cooperation projects to foster the European Youth Work Agenda.

The funding programs of both institutions - **Erasmus+ youth and European Solidarity Corps** in the European Union, and the **European Youth Foundation** in the Council of Europe - are only partially aligned with the Agenda. Both institutions are expected by stakeholders to realign their respective funding instruments so that they can become a mechanism for stronger support for Agenda implementation. Although it is acknowledged that within the programs, projects can be undertaken that are linked to the agenda and its thematic priorities, at the same

time it is criticised that there have been no new types of funds and financial instruments to provide a more extensive support.

The **National Agencies**, although closely related to the European Union as the executive of the Erasmus+ Youth and ESC programmes, are perceived as important actors at the European level. There is a clear dichotomy between some National Agencies - most notably Germany, Belgium-Flanders, Finland and Slovenia - which play a very active role in the European Youth Work Agenda, and the majority of National Agencies which keep a low profile. The involvement of active National Agencies is mostly related to the Strategic National Agency Cooperations (SNACs) that are supporting the Agenda implementation. These SNACs are essentially cooperations among the National Agencies. As such, they are strongly self-led and self-coordinated, focussing on cooperation firstly among the National Agencies and among actors they chose to involve in these projects. Examples of such youth work related SNACs are the SNAC on strengthening youth work in Europe by supporting the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda; Europe Goes Local; the European Academy on Youth Work; the SNAC on education and training of youth workers, and the SNAC on digital youth work. Some of the National Agencies have also taken the role of coordinating the National Working Groups for the agenda, even though their role is mostly to support other stakeholders, and not to take initiatives at the national level.

Similar to the National Agencies, the SALTO Resource Centres also play an important role in the further development of the goals of the European Youth Work Agenda. An example is the development of the European Training Strategy, its competence model for youth workers and its training courses implemented by the SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre. Connected to this, a voluntary certificate for trainers of youth workers is to be piloted.

National governments

If we now turn from the two European institutions and its linked bodies and organisations to the **national governments** - which play a considerable institutional role both in the framework of the European Union (Youth Working Party) and the Council of Europe (CDEJ) -, a dichotomy between expectation and reality can be observed. National governments are expected to have a strong role in the Agenda implementation, particularly the national ministries and/or governmental bodies in charge of youth. However, only a few governments are involved nowadays, and in general it is attested that there is a very low level of awareness and interest among the others. The reason may lie in the different realities of the states. It is assumed that countries with well-established youth work structures feel that they do not need the Agenda, while countries with no or only few structures do not have the possibilities to implement the Agenda. Here, a greater role of the European Commission and the Council of Europe is desired, being more directive towards their member states in asking them to implement activities supporting the agenda on a national level.

The **European Service Center for the Bonn Process** is a project initiated by the German government within JUGEND für Europa, the German National Agency for Erasmus+ Youth and Sport and the European Solidarity Corps, and has the task of supporting national implementation processes through communication, information sharing, the provision of information material and the support of the national coordinators in the member states. Examples are the yearly “Bonn process exchange forum on national processes” and annual “Bonn Process Meetups” for the Community of Practice. Its creation is seen as a follow-up

effort of the German Ministry to push the agenda forward after the presidency was over. The interviewees, most notably government officials, representatives of National Agencies as well as civil society organisations generally assess the establishment of the Center as a positive development, given the lack of coordination and leadership by European institutions and other governments following the 3rd European Youth Work Convention. Nevertheless, it is stipulated that there is confusion as to what role the Bonn Service Centre plays in the agenda, also and especially in comparison to the Youth Partnership. The fact that a project set up by a national government has to support the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda is attested as a deficit of the two European institutions. With the growing role of the Youth Partnership, however, the European Service Center - at least at the European level - is seen as having a decreasing role.

Civil society

When considering the role of civil society with regard to the European Youth Work Agenda, the results are quite mixed. The perception is that the process has not arrived yet in the youth work field and among youth workers and youth organisations. This also applies to (umbrella) organisations active at the European level. Here the activity of some organisations - **European Youth Forum, ERYICA, Eurodesk** and some others - is acknowledged, but at the same time it is critically observed that their involvement is mostly limited to participating in the Steering Group and/or following the process. However, there is also the question of labelling - there are no own projects for the European Youth Work Agenda, but the work of the organisations contributes to the further development of the field of youth work, and thus to the goals of the Agenda. Examples are the adoption of the competency frameworks for “youth information worker” and for “Eurodesk mobility advisor”, carried out by ERYICA and Eurodesk.

The work of national associations of youth workers, which in many cases have taken over ownership of the Agenda at national level and are carrying out their own projects to support the Agenda, is evaluated positively. In particular, the cooperation of several national associations in two Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership should be mentioned. One project, “European youth workers unite to empower youth and youth field – Youth worker is a lifestyle”, accompanies the process of founding a European association of youth workers. The second project, “the future of youth workers”, aims at designing a European training proposal for youth workers.

4. Some first conclusions and questions for discussion

Two and a half years after the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, the European Youth Work Agenda is an active element of European policy. However, the Agenda is still very much seen as limited to high-level policy making. This may be surprising, since at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention the agenda was announced for the whole community of practice, which includes all levels (European, national, regional and local) as well as the different actors (European institutions, governments and civil society).

However, the exact reasons can only be speculated at this stage of the study. In the validation workshop at the symposium, the authors would therefore like to discuss the following questions in particular:

- Does the visualisation and its description reflect the reality as perceived by the workshop participants?

- What is missing in the ecosystem?
- What expectations do the participants have of the ecosystem actors?
- How do expectations and reality relate to each other?
- Are there data gaps or blind spots on engagement of governments and civil society with the EYWA implementation?

Skopje/Eichenau, 26 May 2023