

Youth Partnership

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



YOUTH PERSPECTIVES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

New Tasks for Research and Policy

International conference

20-21 October 2025

Scotland House

Rond Point Schuman 6 Brussels, Belgium

REPORT

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DISCLAIMER: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Commission and the Council of Europe's Youth Partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the partner institutions.

Rapporteur's Note

*I am going to take a different approach from the norm in reporting on this conference. All the presentations – together with the programme, the agenda, the participants' list, and the concept note - are available online on the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership website (see [page of the event](#)). Instead of reporting on them, I will draw out what I consider to have been the salient points made in each presentation. This will be referred to hereafter as **Content**. This will be followed by my own contemporaneous notes relating to each presentation, provided as both questions and comments. This will be referred to hereafter as **Comment**. Some of those issues, but by no means all, though hopefully the most salient points, will also be captured in my research conference concluding remarks, as the Rapporteur, and they are also listed, in no particular order, but within some clustered themes, in [my online Powerpoint presentation](#). I hope this will provide a more dynamic, digestible and provocative set of notes for readers to reflect on and consider in relation to their own position within the youth research, policy and practice environment in Europe.*

Howard Williamson

November 2025

Opening and Introduction

The international conference Youth Perspectives in Contemporary Europe was organised by the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth. The conference was an opportunity to take stock of the research conducted by the partnership during the 2024-25 workplan, as well as to identify topics for a future research agenda.

The objectives of the conference were to:

- Bring together a diverse range of stakeholders in the youth field — including young people, youth organisations, policy makers, European institutions, researchers, and other relevant actors — to discuss young people’s realities in contemporary Europe;
- Provide a space for dialogue between researchers, policy makers, and representatives of youth organisations on topics of major importance;
- Disseminate knowledge and research gathered and analysed by the Youth Partnership over the past two years, share key findings, and highlight new and emerging issues in the youth field;
- Identify research and support needs to better address the current realities of young people, informing future youth policies and practices.

Clotilde Talleu, Manager of the Youth Partnership, opened the event, taking note of the recent Council of Europe Youth Ministers’ meeting in Malta, the first for some 13 years. Beyond its formal Declaration, it had agreed a Reference Framework for the Council of Europe ‘youth perspective’. From the side of the European Commission, work was now taking place in shaping the next EU Youth Strategy.

The issues facing Europe and young people across Europe are manifold. Young people are shaping 21st-century European societies amid expanding digital networks, shifting demographics and a rapidly changing environment. The democratic, cyber, and physical spaces they navigate are vastly different from those of previous generations. At the same time, young people in Europe are mobilising around issues such as environmental protection, democratic values, diversity, equality and inclusion as well as countering extremist ideologies, white-supremacy and the *anti-gender movement*.

Democratic participation relies on equal access to rights and inclusion, yet racism, religious intolerance and anti-LGBTI attitudes continue to undermine this principle. At the same time, shrinking civic space has made self-organisation more difficult, with growing legislative, financial and administrative barriers for youth organisations. Factors such as social media algorithms, economic insecurity, limited representation and declining trust in institutions can discourage youth engagement. Vulnerable groups – including young people with disabilities, refugees, migrants, Roma, LGBTI people, young people in rural areas and those from low-income backgrounds – face additional challenges, which European states are addressing to varying degrees.

Through its 2024–2025 work plan, the Youth Partnership has been exploring these and other topics of importance to young people, including youth perspectives and youth mainstreaming; youth

activism in the context of the climate crisis and democracy; mental health and well-being, particularly in relation to the cost of living and digitalisation; and the rights of young people in rural areas.

There is a ‘long list’ of issues that demand attention. There are huge challenges around cementing young people’s resilience and supporting their agency and creativity.

Through its 2024–2025 work plan, the Youth Partnership has been exploring these and other topics of importance to young people, including youth perspectives and youth mainstreaming; youth activism in the context of the climate crisis and democracy; mental health and well-being, particularly in relation to the cost of living and digitalisation; and the rights of young people in rural areas. The international research conference provides a renewed opportunity to reflect on past and current work, and to strengthen the partnerships between youth research, youth policy and youth (work) practice in planning for the future.

Rapporteur’s Comments

- *Frameworks and strategies are not so difficult to write; putting them into practice, with their intended impact and outcomes is the challenge*
- *‘Facilitating agency’ and ‘developing navigational capacities’ were two definitions of youth work from outside of Europe referenced in the preparatory paper for the 2nd European Youth Work Convention*
- *Attention is drawn to Pam Nilan’s book, *Young People and the Far Right* (Palgrave 2021)*
- *There is certain a ‘long list’ of issues facing young people, youth policy and youth research in Europe!*

Youth Realities in Today's Europe: Why Research Matters for (Youth) Policy and Practice

The conference started with a panel on the importance of research for policy and practice, with the following speakers:

Tobias Flessenkemper, Head of the Youth Department, the Council of Europe

In current post for two years but with a long-standing connection to the youth sector in Europe, not least as Secretary-General of the European Youth Forum at the turn of the millennium and, indeed, one of the architects of the Youth Partnership

Karen Vandeweghe, Deputy Head of Unit of the unit B.3 'Youth and Volunteer Solidarity', Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, European Commission

Responsible for youth policy and practice co-ordination within the European Commission, the Youth Dialogue, the European Solidarity Corps, and outreach initiatives such as the European Youth Week.

Tom Matthew, Board Member, the European Youth Forum

Through its member organisations (pan-European youth organisations and national youth councils), the European Youth Forum has a 'strong mandate' to advocate for young people in Europe. Both data and lived experience are needed to respond to the 'complex realities' facing young people, not least because of the 'erosion of truth'.

WHY does research matter?

Content

For the European Commission, evidence-based policy making is the guiding principle of the European Commission. There is a need to establish what young people want in this complex world; research can determine 'exact concerns and insights', otherwise resources and initiatives risk missing the target. Research provides a snapshot for key actions (for example, the research activity of the RAY network). It can also provide a reality check in relation to existing programmes. Research can also assist in anticipating the future.

The Council of Europe considers that there is a strong case for taking a fresh look, through research, at what the questions and issues are today. They are certainly not the same as they were 30 years ago, when youth mobility and intercultural learning were high on the list. Today, the concerns are war and conflict perhaps military service, questions of resilience, and addressing various forms of division. There seems to be a need for a paradigm shift, towards a new kind of (youth) policy.

We should appreciate and be attentive to the acknowledgement of research in the recent Youth Minister's Conference declaration. But hard work is needed to find the best methods for conducting this research. The agreed Reference Framework on a youth perspective may help but we have to think deeply about how to *reach* a 'youth perspective' in a time in Europe when young people are a structural minority and when there appears to be less research interest in 'youth'.

European Youth Forum considers it important to distinguish between the subscribers and non-subscribers to existing national and European structures and institutions. There are many young people in Europe who are excluded or self-excluded. We have to find out more about them. There is also a need to rethink how we communicate our values to those who are harder to reach, those whose lives are deeply affected by conflict, insecurity and poverty. Research provides credibility to those efforts: it increases the depth of our understanding and (hopefully) it produces more effective policy. Data can strengthen the youth sector being heard and not being ignored. European Youth Forum also publishes a [Youth Progress Index](#), which contains valuable data about young people, measuring the quality of life and rights.

Rapporteur's Comments

- *Precision in research may be something of a holy grail. Different methods produce different results. Political ideologies draw on the research that fits those political agendas.*
- *Scanning the future is risky business; research can be found to point in multiple, different directions.*
- *Things were certainly different 30 years ago, but equally, at least sometimes, 'plus ça change, plus reste la même chose'.*
- *There may be some merit in reading my online book published under Belgium's recent Presidency of the Council of the European Union: Taking Stock – Where are we now: Youth work in contemporary Europe (Flemish Government).*
- *There are certainly too many research 'silos' with limited connections between them, but often valuable for any 'youth research' knowledge base. Dedicated research centres on issues such as employment, health or the internet invariably have some focus on young people; there are numerous relevant journals (Journal of Youth Studies, YOUNG, Youth Voice Journal, Adolescents, International Journal of Social Pedagogy; and there are important youth research networks (ESA RN30 Youth and Generation; ISA RC34 Youth Research).*
- *There is an urgency to 'get real' and learn more about those young people who are celebrating strong leaders, rejecting democracy, not part of youth organisations, and embracing fake news and right-wing ideology*
- *In 1996 the UK established the Research, Policy and Practice Forum on Young People. It lasted a few years and gathered and presented key research on key issues from community cohesion to mentoring. It was supported by government (policy), informed by research (Joseph Rowntree Foundation) and administered by practice (National Youth Agency)*
- *There can be a risk of being data rich but information poor. Data requires interpretation*
- *Youth research can explore many dimensions of young people's lives, across and between generations. See Chapter 1 in About Time (Partnership Knowledge Book #28), which draws heavily on a chapter I wrote in the 1990s, called 'In Search of a Framework'.*

WHAT does contemporary youth research need to address?

Content

WHAT does contemporary youth research need to address?

EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM

- Shrinking civic space
- Social and economic inclusion (graduate jobs; 25% of young people in poverty)
- Climate change
- Artificial intelligence

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

- Cost of living
- Affordable housing
- Mental health
- Climate change
- AI and misinformation
- Cyber bullying
- Intergenerational fairness
- Combating poverty

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

- Revitalising democracy
- The role of youth work in fomenting democratic cultures
- Dealing with disinformation and random data claims
- Continuing to recognise the impact of gender, race and class
- Making better use of Participatory (Action) Research
- Politicians are pushing away the evidence [Research has to “claim a space in the debate”]
- Considering how research is perceived in policy and practice
- Helping member states to develop interventions and indicators

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Rapporteur's Comments

- *Housing has been an overlooked item in the youth policy agenda – and also the youth research agenda – for decades*
- *Online safety was only hinted at implicitly*
- *No mention of faith, and its relation to many issues, both positive and negative*
- *There is a long history of methodological diversity, but different methods elicit very different credibility*
- *The research side of the triangle with policy makers and youth organisations is often undermined for having no democratic mandate*
- *Research impact can be very dependent on the weight of political debate (the ‘status zero/NEET debate in the UK’s House of Lords in 1994 involved Bertrand Russell’s son, a former Prime Minister, a former Welsh Secretary, and a former Head of the Trades Union Congress)*

HOW can/should that research agenda be developed / delivered?

Content

The Council of Europe is now entering a new phase, in which the organisation needs a stronger framework for mapping and harnessing existing research, building coherent research agendas, engaging PhD students to take forward issues that concern us, improving our dissemination strategies, ensuring 'multi-faceted' contributions to this debate – in short, carrying out some 'stocktaking' before moving further forward:

- Commissioning (through a more participatory process)
- Strengthening (the quality of the research)
- Connecting (with the policy cycle)

The European Commission plans to improve the flow, take all stakeholders' views into account through better co-operation, forge better links with existing programmes, and ensure open access to the data that best reflects current realities.

The European Youth Forum emphasised a need to challenge alarmism through generating more robust evidence of the grounded realities. Too much research evidence is undermined. Robust evidence needs robust advocacy through stronger partnerships between researchers and civil society. That will produce a greater chance of connecting to the 'heat' of today's key issues.

Rapporteur's Comments

- *A reminder not to forget the book (now 20 years old) called Dialogues and Networks: Organising Exchanges between Youth Field Actors (edited by Milmeister and Williamson 2006)*
- *There is an unequivocal case for sharing, blending and debating research 'knowledge' and stories from lived experience*
- *Deeper collective understanding as a result of joint discussions and shared, collaborative activity can certainly produce stronger advocacy*
- *But the caveat is the lack of any formal 'mandate' for the researchers in the third corner of the triangle!*

PART 1: Youth participation and civic space

Shrinking civic space, democratic backsliding, and increasing constraints on civil society and directly impacting on participation and activism across Europe. Young people, in particular, are facing growing barriers to fully engaging in democratic and civic life. In response, European institutions are reinforcing their commitment to democracy through initiatives such as the Council of Europe's New Democratic Pact and the European Democracy Shield.

Young People in Democratic Societies

The two following parallel sessions aimed to 'set the scene' by exploring current understanding of youth participation trends at global and European levels: a presentation of the Global Youth Participation Index by the European Partnership for Democracy, and a presentation of the Youth Partnership's study on democracy and youth civic space.

The Global Youth Participation Index¹

Ana Mosiashvili, European Partnership for Democracy (EPD)

Sarah Pickard, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle

Content

The GYPI represents the first systematic global effort (it covers 141 countries) to collect data on the participation of young people in economic, civic and political life. It aims to deconstruct common myths and stereotypes surrounding youth participation and to provide evidence-based insights into the conditions enabling or hindering young people's engagement.

The Index is built around four key dimensions:

- Socio-economic participation
- Civic space
- Political affairs
- Elections

It includes 41 variables measuring opportunities, barriers, and systemic enablers of youth participation. Core insights from the index data are as follows. First, youth exclusion is not a result of individual failure, but rather a global design flaw embedded in political and socio-economic systems. Second, countries with persistent gender inequality and structural barriers tend to score lower across all participation dimensions. Third, participation in civic space shows relatively higher average scores globally than in political affairs and elections, suggesting that formal political participation remains the weakest area. And fourth, in terms of data analysis, the

¹ notes provided by Marko Kovačić

interpretation of scores is crucial: two countries may share the same average score but differ significantly in distribution; one country might have consistently moderate results (stability), while the other reveals extremes (success in some variables but failure in others). This underscores the limitations of averages in representing the complexity of youth participation.

In terms of policy relevance, the Index provides actionable evidence on both the opportunities and barriers shaping young people's engagement in different spheres of life. Furthermore, it encourages policymakers to adopt a systemic and data-informed approach to youth inclusion.

To that end, there appear to be several key recommendations arising from the findings of the Index:

- Adopt a holistic approach – isolated reforms are insufficient; systemic integration across education, employment and governance is required.
- Improve the quality of education to enhance civic and political competencies.
- Expand access to the internet and digital tools to reduce participation gaps.
- Open access to public sector employment and political opportunities for all young people.
- Introduce automatic voter registration to facilitate political inclusion.
- Strengthen youth representation in political parties, especially within local and national executive structures.
- Remove restrictive age barriers that prevent young people from holding office or participating fully.

In conclusion, there is a paramount imperative to ensure respect for political rights and civil liberties so that young people can freely express themselves and engage in civil society.

Current state of democracy and youth civic space in Europe (results of a study conducted by the Youth Partnership)

Gilda Isernia, Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR)

Content

The Youth Partnership's study on democracy and youth civic space emphasizes the need to 'safeguard' civic space for young people in the context of 'shrinking civic space'. The study is based on a survey of 129 youth organisations and ten expert interviews. Survey respondents were largely National Youth Councils and issue-based NGOs, though it was also suggested that responses had been a mix of public and private organisations, umbrella and more 'on the ground' bodies, and both youth-led and 'other' organisations.

Findings were organised around general issues, barriers and opportunities for youth engagement, and issues to do with rights and freedoms

General trends identified through the study include democratic backsliding, an increase in surveillance and misinformation, and the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, when spaces

were closed down and were never re-established. In terms of youth engagement and advocacy, the study revealed a downward trend, a diminishing influence of young people on policy, and some fear of retribution if young people engaged in activism. It explores the following dimensions of civic space: freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and access to information, and also provides further insights into declining access to funding and the delegitimisation of NGOs.

The study had dealt with the 'heterogeneity' of Europe; it was acknowledged that a preponderance of responses had emanated from Belgium and Ireland, but that there had been responses from all Council of Europe countries and so a reasonably calibrated analysis had been possible.

The discussion raised several questions regarding:

- The relationship between online and offline spaces and their interaction
- A knock-on' effects of 'demonisation' through participation in civic space. Was there any evidence of young people limiting their own space? It was acknowledged that this was a strong possibility.
- Was there a time when youth organisations did not have to worry about shrinking civic space?
- The (positive) impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on digital space. While it was acknowledged that it had opened up some possibilities for young people, it had also demonstrated a capacity to close down (more physical) civic space.
- The impact of factors such as the language (and therefore comprehension) of the survey, and the individual characteristics (race, gender, class, legal status) of respondents. It was not possible to address or answer these questions, though they raised some critical issues about understanding the participation and engagement with democracy of young people in contemporary Europe.
- When asked about 'the coming years', it was argued that the study revealed a paradigm shift in opportunities and practices of youth participation: it was no longer 'the usual'.

Rapporteur's Comments

- *More research attention needs to be paid to the relationship between online and offline civic activity by youth organisations*
- *The 'anxiety- producing' consequences of both online and offline civic action, perhaps producing self-censorship and a resultant self-imposed narrowing of civic space merits urgent research inquiry*
- *Was there a time when youth organisations (and indeed youth researchers) did 'not have to worry'?*
- *Any form of action, protest or critique carries institutional and individual risks of labelling, scapegoating, exclusion or persecution. Academics have also had to self- censor (cf. UK*

Drugs Unlimited) or 'run' after exposing particular issues or forging particular arguments (cf Inside the British Police).

- *Barack Obama has said that today's generation of 'global North' young people can no longer take democracy and its rights and freedoms for granted, and that they will have to 'show more courage'.*
- *Other than around 1999-2019, which probably was a 'golden age' for relatively unproblematic and relatively risk-free youth participation, European youth have always had to show courage – combating Nazism in 1939-45, Czechoslovakia in 1968, 'les évènements' in 1968, the Berlin Wall in 1989, and more.*
- *More research attention needs to be paid to what Gill Jones has referred to as The Youth Divide. Which young people are fighting for the revitalisation of pluralist democracy and the preservation of civic space, and who are not? Gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, urban/rural, legal status?*

Breakout Discussions Content

The follow-up discussion on democracy and civic space centered around the following points:

- There is a need for more research analysis about the horizontal and vertical dimensions of 'shrinking civic space'. There also needs to be more scrutiny of compliance with international human rights frameworks and, indeed, their advocacy. Shrinking civic space is not an individual or 'youth' problem but a systematic, societal issue.
- Space is not just given, or 'a given'. It is something for *collective re-creation* – through relating to each other, meeting and coming together, constructing open spaces for dialogue and development.
- We have to acknowledge and respond to the 'fluctuating relationships' between government and civil society. They are not a constant nor consistent.
- The European Youth Forum commissioned research *before* the Covid-19 pandemic and it produced similar results about shrinking civic space. So what do we need to do? We have to find new, alternative paths. More, safe, spaces.
- Where are the connections with youth wings of political parties? Many connections need strengthening, including looking at the effects of Artificial Intelligence on young people, and young people's positive and purposeful use of AI. Sometimes youth workers seem rather unwilling to confront these new challenges.
- It will be important to build stronger and better bridges to fight these battles. There is also shrinking space in academia, as academic freedom gets eroded and corroded, and authoritarian, risk-averse, bureaucratic management takes over. If we do not forge new alliances, we will find ourselves running round in circles.

Shrinking civic space: tool for youth organisations

Lana Pasic (Youth Partnership) and Gilda Isernia (PEYR) presented the upcoming tool for youth organisations, which was developed based on the aforementioned study. The Tool provides 'a way to' advocate for the idea of civic space that is visible, tangible and actionable. It offers material for reflection, diagnosis and resources for action.

Participants at the conference were split into professional groups – youth organisations, European institutions, researchers, and national ministries – to test the Tool.

Civic space is a spectrum of possibilities, and the Tool offers an 'accessible compass' towards a common understanding. Three items/examples were addressed and discussed:

- Access to, and restrictions on FUNDING
- Accessibility of INFORMATION
- SAFETY of youth activists

These triggers generated a plethora of debate and comments, including concerns about 'foreign agents' legislation restricting access to funds, the capacity and confidence of ministries to support youth participation amidst a 'proliferation of policy positions', a palpable lack of trust in many countries between stakeholders in the youth field, confusing and sometimes contradictory information flows (despite the help of, for example, ERYICA and Eurodesk), and the increasing risks and vulnerabilities for youth activists.

The concluding plenary discussion agreed that there needs to be a robust process of discovery to set out the relevant parameters of youth civic space, and to then consider the steps being taken to promote and defend this space, and the action still required.

Rapporteur's Comments:

- *SPACES for young people, of many kinds, remain a critical issue.*
- *Defending and extending such spaces will always be a struggle, not 'given'*
- *Historically, that struggle derived from, and often led to, discrimination, incarceration and sacrifice*
- *The increasing use of the language of conflict is interesting – it gives an impression that there are battles to fight*
- *Alliances, if sometimes rather uneasy, are critical (in Wales, where I live, youth work has engaged with both the church and the police – together – to assert its case*
- *The left side of the 'youth policy clock' (see [About Time! A reference manual for youth policy from a European perspective](#)) is significant. 'Debate' is important, and 'dissent' needs attention, but for 'development' and 'direction' in the youth field, different actors and stakeholders need to come and work together*
- *I once wrote that 'inter-agency co-operation' rested on a precarious equilibrium of institutional, professional and personal relationships (Strategies for Intervention 1985).*
- *We have to acknowledge the 'complexity of institutional landscapes' and work out ways to 'navigate the storm'. Justice policy and Education policy, for example, will say very different things about young people.*
- *Governments and government policies are complex, but we have to look at anomalies within them both over time and at the same time. This demands reflection on what are 'valid' battles to fight, and what is pointless.*

DAY 2: EU Youth Report: what do we know about young people in Europe? Key pointers and perspectives

Guilia Paolini and Diana Antonello, EACEA

Content

The EU Youth Report has ten chapters, making use of 90 indicators. The data is from 2023/24. Key themes addressed are as follows:

- Democracy
- Education
- Participation
- Mobility
- Digitalisation
- Health
- Employment
- Green issues
- Inclusion
- Youth work

The Report includes 'new' themes that will require particular attention and inquiry prior to the next Report:

- Disinformation and fake news: young people are increasingly aware of their vulnerability to false information; there is a strong case for better education to equip young people to deal with this.
- Environmental issues and green transition: climate change is considered to be the most serious problem facing the planet (more than poverty or conflict); they look to the EU to act on this.
- Mental health: one in two young people are now experiencing poor mental health, which is likely to be the result of the impact of world events.

It is important to note that there are many socio-demographic differences in the lives of young people in Europe, especially with regard to inequality, poverty and unemployment, though also in terms of 'participation' - voting in elections, engagement in civil society and mobility. The EU Youth Report suggests that some 70% of young people have voted, around one-third are engaged, and 43% have benefited from mobility programmes.

These conclusions underscore the importance of education in equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to deal with misinformation, and to emphasise young people's support for climate action. Other crucial issues the report identified were: mental health, the need for more robust support for more vulnerable groups of young people, young people's engagement in civic action and a considerable potential to involve more young people in mobility programmes.

The ensuing discussion started with the important question of ‘what do we do with all this information and understanding?’, and ‘were there new topics that need similar attention?’. The discussion was in fact deeply embedded in addressing the latter question, generating a range of other questions:

- *Housing*, and the current living circumstances and situation of young people. What are their sources of support?
- Young people’s *outlook*: do they think they will be better off than their parents?
- Beyond education, what is young people access to *information*, to support their making informed decisions in this world of misinformation?
- How much do young people feel they have *safety and space* to be young?
- Do young people believe they have ‘*political efficacy*’, the ability to influence the decisions that affect their lives?

Rapporteur’s Comments

- *Mental (ill-)health dominates youth sector debate, yet the terminology is problematic. There is no doubt that many more young people today are displaying anxiety about both the present and the future, for many reasons. The ‘poly-crisis’ discussed by Krastev and Leonard (2024) and indeed by me in Taking Stock (2024) testify to that. Research tells us that it is ‘social dislocation’ rather than social disadvantage that produces psycho-social disorders in young people, so perhaps the youth sector should be looking more at ideas such as well-being belonging, and ‘mattering’.*
- *The list of issues discussed in the EU Youth Report hardly takes us by surprise. Don’t we know all this reasonably well already? The burning question is what should be done about it.*
- *The general picture portrayed is instructive, but a more critical understanding is required, one that drills into differences between and indeed within Member States, and within the heterogeneity of the youth demographic.*
- *Housing has, for a long time now, been a much-neglected area of attention in both youth research and youth policy.*
- *Asset transfer between the generations is a significant finding from the Australian Life Patterns study. Young people in seemingly similar precarious situations may be there for quite different reasons, depending on their real or possible access to parental (or, indeed, grandparental) financial and material support.*
- *I once suggested to a former EU Commissioner that youth information was the first step in a process of youth engagement and participation in EU youth programmes: Awareness, Access, Action, Accreditation, Advancement....*

PART 2: Youth mainstreaming and youth perspectives in policy making

Integrating the voices, rights and interests of young people into policymaking is gaining momentum across Europe. This shift is being reinforced at a European level through initiatives such as the Council of Europe's forthcoming Reference Framework for a Youth Perspective – a key outcome of the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government – and the European Commission's ongoing work on Youth Mainstreaming and the Youth Check, as part of the broader implementation of the EU Youth Strategy. These policy frameworks are also designed to support member States in embedding youth perspectives into policymaking at national and local levels.

Case studies at national and local levels across Europe: successes, challenges, and lessons learned

Marko Kovačić (PEYR) and Howard Williamson (PEYR Advisory Group)

The Youth Partnership study 'Learning from national and local approaches to youth mainstreaming and the use of youth perspective in policy making across Europe', had been conducted by Dan Moxon, Marko Kovačić and Veronica Stefan.

The presentation focused on the conceptualisation of the two ideas of 'youth perspective' and 'youth mainstreaming' before consideration of the more empirical foundations and implementation of these ideas, and what the study can tell us moving forward.

The foundations of the ideas can be found in senior political commitment to them, promoting the idea of cross-sectoral collaboration, and therefore building capacity and resourcing to ensure a stronger attention to young people's voices and to the impact of wider policies on young people's lives.

The key learning from the study is that inter-sectoral arrangements have to be put into place, and mechanisms for youth participation strengthened, if youth perspectives are to be secured. For youth mainstreaming and establishing youth checks, however, co- management with young people need not be essential, and other methods can be – and indeed, are being – used.

Looking forward, it is clear that, to date, there are many overlaps, as well as differences, between 'youth perspectives' and 'youth mainstreaming', though both are anchored within some core principles of enabling and ensuring attention to youth voice and youth impact. Case studies suggest that, in practice, conceptual differentiation can appear to be little more than semantics and distinctions tend to fade.

Indeed, there remains considerable conceptual confusion between the two ideas and a strong recommendation from the study is that what is being spoken about needs further clarification before any toolkits or standards are developed. The ideas had different starting points but it is important to underline the political commitment that underpins them and to move forward from there.

The upcoming Youth Knowledge Book 'Angles and Standpoints: demystifying the concepts of 'youth perspective' and 'youth mainstreaming' has been edited by Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll, Irina Lonean, Howard Williamson and Etch Kalala.

These concepts have two different starting points: the European Union's European Year of Youth 2022, for 'youth mainstreaming' and the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in 2023, for 'youth perspective'.

The 'Angles and Standpoints' book is structured in four sections:

- Institutional views
- Theorising Concepts and Definitions
- National Experiences from the Youth Sector
- Practices beyond the European Youth Sector

Different conclusions had surfaced from taking this approach. Beyond advocacy by both the European Commission and the Council of Europe, one could detect some shared and overlapping themes emerging from a conceptual reflection. As a result of the 'poly-crisis' (already discussed) facing young people in Europe, there needs to be renewed and resurgent focus on their current needs and anticipated futures, through:

- Securing and strengthening youth rights
- Restating a commitment to social justice
- Agreeing a 'wraparound' concept, encapsulating both 'input from' and 'impact on'
- Building on a continuum from participation to perspective to mainstreaming
- Sharpening meaningful youth participation
- Integrating 'youth' into wider public and social policy
- Making a youth perspective a principle and prerequisite of youth mainstreaming
- Enabling and ensuring consultation and engagement with young people

Yet, there are different forms of 'youth perspective'. Not only do young people themselves have different perspectives, but beyond perspectives *from* young people, there are also perspectives *on* young people. Moreover, different methodologies produce different perspectives. 'Nothing about us, without us' and 'youthless policy is useless policy' may both be important mantras, but young people do not have a monopoly on views about their lives or the policies that may affect their lives. Other approaches may also yield important – positive and purposeful – traction on opportunities, experiences and interventions for young people. In the book, checks and tests, the ideas of young professionals, the findings of youth research, and litigation were cited.

If youth mainstreaming is going to, amongst other things, take youth perspectives beyond the youth sector, then the youth sector more broadly may have to advocate and help to organise

this, given its prevailing experience. The structural challenges to this will be palpable. Contributors to the book testified to political volatility and resource precarity in sustaining commitment to these ideas.

There are other risks. The issue of intersectionality suggests that care must be taken not to privilege 'youth' over other dimensions of discrimination and disadvantage that may be affecting different groups of young people. Working with both 'pushes' and 'pulls' around perspective and mainstreaming will be important. Lessons from gender mainstreaming in the EU (and the work of the late Teresa Rees and colleagues) should be carefully considered: documentation may suggest impressive progress, whereas empirical realities on the ground may suggest something very different.

The book concludes that there is a need to move forward with care and caution. Youth perspective and youth mainstreaming is work in progress. There is a spectrum of issues, arguments and possibilities to be confronted, discussed and resolved.

The discussion that followed suggested that the ideas of youth perspective and youth mainstreaming were a 'big success already'. The Council of Europe had its 'Reference Framework on the youth perspective'; the European Commission had many other pillars, including the Youth Check. This had all resulted from a 'big push from the youth sector', capitalising on the 'momentum from politics'. It had been a matter of 'supply and demand' – the demand had derived from the political sphere, but the content and subsequent flesh on the bones of the demand had been provided by the Council of Europe Youth Department and its statutory bodies, and by the European Commission Youth Unit and the EU Youth Coordinator. 'Youth perspective' was working its way into legislative and regulatory frameworks, and 'youth mainstreaming' was now becoming 'basic housekeeping' in the European Commission.

Embedding a youth perspective is critical for the survival of democracy. Business depends on money and Politics depends on votes. With the demographics of Europe producing a diminishing pool of young people, a vicious circle could easily emerge in which 'youth' is increasingly marginalised and isolated. The structural inclusion of 'youth' is a way of future proofing democracy, if the beneficiaries today can carry 'youth perspectives' through their lifetime. It is an exercise in generational solidarity.

Notwithstanding these warm words, based on a strong analysis of present and a plausible anticipation of the future, there was some concern that these current developments might generate a host of new panels, boards and committees that might end up being little more than decoration ("how will we measure efficacy and meaning?", one participant asked), yet at the same time undermine existing structures that have at least evolved with purpose and stood the test of time, if still imperfect.

Concern was also expressed about converting principles to action, especially in terms of connecting European-level aspirations to the local level. It was acknowledged that this is a broad 'problem' but that the concepts of 'perspective' and 'mainstreaming' were developed as 'tools from and for the European level', to set standards, inform and be informed by research, and establish policy momentum for 'youth', so that, for example, youth perspectives are not taken, if at all, just by default.

There are a wide range of initiatives to strengthen 'meaningful' youth participation, not exclusively from policy perspectives. Taking a youth perspective can be viewed as 'participation plus', in relation to, for example, the engagement with and of National Youth Councils, but there is also, for example, the work of the Venice Commission, involving young lawyers and endeavouring to make the 'rule of law' more comprehensible to a wider constituency of young people. Within the European Commission, the youth mainstreaming imperative has led to engagement with DG ENER (Energy) and other sections of the Commission.

All these developments are, it has to be acknowledged, very recent, though they pre-date the European Commission President's establishment of a Youth Advisory Board. The query was raised as to whether, if mainstreaming works, we will be needed? It was more than a rhetorical question. It was followed by the concern that few will have explored the issues as closely and deeply as the research reported at this conference and may well be operating (perhaps not very effectively) on little more than 'glimpses' of what is at stake.

Rapporteur's Comments

- *Integration – yes, co-operation, communication and linkages are essential, though one must avoid repetition and duplication*
- *Different angles need to be heard and considered, but sooner rather than later, some alignment and meeting of the ways is essential if progress is to be made*
- *My 1993 article in the journal Youth and Policy 'Youth Policy in the United Kingdom and the Marginalisation of Young People' revealed how disjointed social policy, some targeted at young people and some simply ignoring young people completely, can have a cumulative deleterious effect on 'youth'*
- *Intergenerational fairness is now an EU policy goal and therefore a reduction in intergenerational inequality should be a more prominent aspiration.*
- *Both 'youth perspective' and 'youth mainstreaming' offer the promise of stepping beyond the youth sector*
- *Aristotle suggest that 'if you want to give the illusion of progress, reorganise'*
- *Peter Hyman, in his 2006 book One out of Ten: from Downing Street vision to Classroom Reality, refers to the 'tyranny of policy momentum' - that it gets faster and faster, with no time for consolidation or evaluation*
- *Whose perspective? This may demand a reflection on the balance to be struck between democratic youth representation and categorical youth representation*
- *The Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life is now in its third iteration. The Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe should perhaps pay close attention to the unfolding of the ideas of youth perspective and youth mainstreaming*
- *Ubuntu – It takes a village to raise a child. Few finish the statement: because if we do not, the child will return and set fire to the village, just to feel a little warmth*
- *The concern about 'glimpses' is apposite and there are legitimate reasons to fear*

'glitches' as a result. Policy co-ordination across levels and sectors is a very challenging task.

Panel discussion: youth mainstreaming and youth perspective in international and European organisations

This session was anchored by a presentation by Tomaž Deželan (University of Ljubljana and PEYR) of the Youth Partnership study 'Youth Mainstreaming: The International Perspective', written by Tomaž Deželan, Sladjana Petkovic and Marti Taru, followed by discussion with a panel comprising Tobias Flessenkemper (Head of the Council of Europe Youth Department), Biliana Sirakova (EU Youth Coordinator, European Commission) and Milosh Ristovski (Secretary-General of the European Youth Forum).

It was argued that there were four key rationales for the mainstreaming imperative: rights, democracy, economic and political. All had already been discussed at the conference.

The study had analysed the documentation around initiatives by the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The study had decided on particular areas for its attention:

- Participation
- Equality/equity
- Responsiveness to need
- Agency/empowerment
- Integration of views
- Prevention of isolation/exclusion
- Creation of a *space*

The common ground across the initiatives explored was the desire to ensure young people's voice and perspectives, and to respond to their needs and challenges. The 'enablers' of securing this commitment were many combinations of the following:

- Political will
- Professional commitment
- Sufficient resources
- Relevant norms
- The involvement of stakeholders
- A culture of youth engagement
- Evidence of youth struggles
- Advocacy and pressure campaigns
- Unsurprisingly, this led to quite a list of recommendations:

- The need for terminological clarity
- Attention to upscaling success
- Investment in coordination
- Willingness to share power
- Establishing a critical mass
- Developing practical and accessible tools
- Accumulating proof that it works!
- Many of these things are far from complete and remain work in progress.

The Panel discussion

EU Youth Coordinator:

In 2022 and 2023, the questions being asked were Why, What, and How. Now there are many more answers, and ‘intergenerational fairness’ has been added to the mix of ideas and strengthened the case in particular for youth mainstreaming even further.

The Youth Check / Youth Test has been piloted on 12 initiatives. Both internal and external capacity has been strengthened. There is now a EU Youth stakeholder group. Development has taken place in many ways, at multiple levels, building capacity – in democracy, in civil society, in ‘youth’. And there will soon be a new Erasmus Plus programme.

Council of Europe:

Primarily wish to add to the ‘Why?’. We need to incorporate the bigger picture, which is about European Unity. The European Union has grown, then shrunk. We must not sugarcoat the fact that young people have in fact contributed to undermining the Union, notably through Brexit. They did not vote, when – had they done so – the result might have been different. It is essential that we work harder to engage young people in the political conversation about and in Europe. It is really rather ‘breathtakingly simple’: the recent Youth Ministers’ conference in Malta said to national delegations, bring a youth delegate and share your speaking time. **Be** with young people.

We have the tools and we can, and must, go further. There is great value in representation, but we have to think deeper about non-representative participation. This is not an either/or; it is a both/and. Take housing – there is a general issue for democratic debate, but some young people are struggling a great deal more than others, and their voices need to be amplified.

European Youth Forum:

The concern is always about *decoration*. Are these more decoration moments? There is a great deal of political work to be done. There is also a need for thematic discussion on the many different issues currently affecting young people in Europe. That requires the earmarking of time and resources to make that happen, and to ensure that those discussions take place at the appropriate level.

*

There was broad consensus that there is a lot of work still to be done, in particular finding

methods and mechanisms to establish what exactly has been achieved. The European institutions are seeking to empower others to deliver on these ideas. Inter-governmental co-operation such as embedding a youth perspective takes time. New questions constantly emerge. The youth sector has, arguably, become very sectoral! It is now perhaps a victim of its own success. Having forged its sectoral identity, it has perhaps cut itself off from wider constituencies that also bear heavily on young people's lives. Perhaps the youth sector has 'got stuck'? Now is the time, and the need, for it to reposition itself and (re-)connect with the contemporary political framework and new realities.

Rapporteur's Comments

- *It is important to acknowledge the multiple factors that may support youth perspectives and youth mainstreaming and to reflect on how best these may be amplified and accentuated*
- *It is important to remember that youth perspective and youth mainstreaming – like the implementation of most policy – depends on both pulls and pushes: the twin forces of the pull of political will (from the 'top') and the push, through struggle and advocacy, of prospective beneficiaries (from the 'bottom')*
- *The Children's Rights Measure in Wales, from 2011, requires all new policy development to be tested for its impact on children and young people*
- *Impact or Input? 'The quality of opportunity and experience provided is sometimes, though not always, more important than the specificity of outcome' (Extending Entitlement: supporting young people in Wales, National Assembly for Wales 2000)*
- *Too much policy focus on age as a distinguishing marker for policy can be counter-productive, as middle-aged or older people argue their case, too. Consider the 'triple-lock' for pensioners in the UK. See also my article with Douglas Smith, in Youth in Society from 1984: 'Future? What Future?'*

Young people's access to rights and services: youth mental health and experiences of rural youth – parallel sessions

Improving the living conditions of young people remains a core priority for both the Council of Europe and the European Commission. This topic has been consistently highlighted by member States and youth organisations, particularly in relation to pressing challenges such as housing, the cost of living, education, employment, and access to essential services like mental health care. Special attention is needed for vulnerable and marginalised youth, who often face systemic barriers to inclusion and participation.

1. Mental health and well-being of young people

Veronica Stefan (PEYR)

Content

During this session, Youth Partnership's study ["Advancing youth mental health and well-being](#)

[A mapping of policy frameworks, tools and services across Europe"](#) was presented.

The study explored the causes of growing 'mental health' issues affecting young people, the policy response, competencies needed to address the issues, services and tools available, and recommendations for the future. The study is based on a desk research and survey that collected 67 responses across 34 countries.

A 'political' starting point might be to note that if, now, one in two young people in Europe report mental health problems, this amounts to a health service economic cost of some 50 billion Euros.

Defining 'mental health' - or, more precisely, mental ill-health – is contentious, though it is invariably associated with the following:

- Instability and precarity in personal circumstances
- Poor health, insecurity and climate anxiety
- The impact of digital transformation and social media

[and generative AI is likely to exacerbate this – though this is still uncharted territory]

All these things are almost certainly 'amplifiers of negative emotions'. The policy response is very mixed; the study provides an overview of policies that draws on responses from 14 countries. The policies are centred around attempts to mitigate the continuing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic; initiatives to do with suicide prevention and stigma reduction; wider measures addressing poverty and social exclusion and vulnerable groups; initiatives promoting socio-emotional and life skills, and dealing with digital media and the online environment; and measures to ensure early intervention and more accessible services.

The study reports that the paramount focus of service provision is to address the needs of families and to invest in schools and cross-sectoral approaches, though some dedicated strategies are also in place. The big issue in many places is the sustainability of whatever provision may have been developed.

The competencies of professionals involved in these policy responses vary enormously. The

professionals themselves range from those based in schools, youth workers in communities, psychologists (presumably with more clinical skills), and other professionals. The essential differences between those intervening in young people's lives are that some are paid professionals while others are volunteers, and that some adopt standardised approaches, while others invoke more ad hoc and non-standardised methods.

There are often profound structural problems in reaching young people and providing appropriate support. These include a reluctance of young people to come forward because of a sense of stigma or anticipated prejudice against them, weak support mechanisms, the burden and frustration of complex procedures, the (un)readiness of professionals, and a lack of resources.

This exploratory study reveals a very patchy mosaic of activity across Europe in response to the burgeoning mental health issues facing young people. There is clearly an urgent need for a more coherent policy response, a commitment to capacity building, the development of a suite of relevant services delivered by appropriate professionals, and more research and data collection on the issue, in the round.

Rapporteur's Comments

- *The first Children's Commissioner for Wales, the late Peter Clarke, once wrote an annual report headlined All Flagships and No Fleet, in response to a Welsh Government policy on mental health called Everybody's Business. He deplored that there was no-one 'on the ground' to actually do the business.*
- *England's Connexions 'youth support service' from 2000 had the strapline 'a universal service differentiated according to need'. This is a wise framework for any youth policy initiative. Many young people need little more than 'light-touch' support; some need more intensive, though not necessarily, specialist attention; and some require clinical intervention. The youth sector would be wise to concentrate on the bottom and perhaps the middle of the triangle/pyramid, arguing for promoting young people's well-being through ensuring association and belonging.*

2. Rural Youth: experiences and needs Francisco Simoes (PEYR)

Content

Youth Partnership's study "Here to Stay? Rural Youth's Transitions Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic examines the experiences of rural youth aged 18–30 across 14 European countries, spanning the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods (2019–2023). The findings are based on a data collected through a multilingual online survey, which was complemented by desk research and case studies of rural youth-focused projects in Armenia, Estonia, Ireland, Romania, and Spain.

The study analyses the situations of young people in rural areas across six dimensions: education, support systems, youth participation, employment, mobilities, and access to leisure, culture and sports. The analysis explores the institutional setup to support young people's transitions into adulthood, looking into youth welfare citizenship, trends, policies, practices, and the personal experiences of rural youth. The combination of these different layers of analysis enabled a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities facing rural youth today.

While there is a significant **policy gap** concerning rural youth, as most countries do not explicitly recognize rural youth as a distinct policy subgroup, there is a vibrant ecosystem of **practices and projects** led by civil society and international networks aimed at addressing rural youth challenges, as well as reliance on informal support networks.

The presentation highlighted the need for a more tailored, inclusive, and strategic approach to rural youth policy, in support of European Youth Goal 6: Moving Rural Youth Forward and in line with the recent recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States of the Council of Europe on the social, economic, and political participation of rural youth. Bridging the policy and practice divide, enhancing stakeholder coordination, and fully integrating rural youth into national and international (EU) frameworks are key to ensuring sustainable rural development.

Rapporteur's Comments

- *Combating the out-migration of young people from rural areas is a huge public policy challenge. It entails consideration of social, economic and cultural rescue*
- *Young people in rural areas may dismiss formal qualifications and credentials in favour of building a strong local reputation for flexibility and hard work. That may serve them well in the local labour market – unless they decide to move.*
- *There are very different rural realities, often not that far apart. In Wales, forestry work for strong young men has been replaced by super-expensive machines that take about one week to do the job of about 20 men over a whole winter; some 40 km away, disused slate caverns that used to then provide seasonal low-paid work in tourism are now home to the longest zip wire in the world and underground trampolines, providing year-round well-paid work for a considerable number of local young people. Neither of those scenarios could have been predicted.*

Presentation of the findings – a Synopsis of the Rapporteur's report

Howard Williamson (Rapporteur)

With a background in youth-related research, policy and practice over half a century, spanning a range of research and policy areas (formal education, health and substance misuse, criminal justice, vocational training and employment, learning disability, public care, enterprise and entrepreneurship, volunteering, social inclusion, safeguarding, advocacy), I found this an engaging and interesting conference.

Having been involved with the Council of Europe and the European Commission for around 40 years, and with the Youth Partnership for all of its 27 years, many of the issues address over that time continue to come to the surface, alongside relatively unfamiliar emergent themes. In no particular order, the past two days have grappled with:

- Digital
- Demography
- Environment

- Democracy
- Human Rights
- The rise of the far Right
- Resilience
- Agency
- Creativity
- Economy
- Security
- Cyber bullying
- Intergenerational fairness
- Artificial intelligence
- Mis/dis/malinformation
- Cost of living
- Affordable housing
- Mental health and well-being

Within and across this spectrum of invariably related issues, there have been some important observations about the place of research and the development of policy:

- Why research matters – does it? Is it possible to identify ‘exact concerns’?
- What are the policy goals of research...? There is the risk of ‘hitting the target, but missing the point’
- These are complex realities, a ‘poly-crisis’ for young people.
- What is the connection between academic research and lived experiences of young people: data and stories enhance our understanding of their realities
- Research can provide both a reality check for today, and support anticipating the future
- Are we in the middle of a ‘paradigm shift’, towards a new kind of ‘youth policy’ derived from taking a fresh look and anchored in a new debate?

Thirty years ago, at a conference in London on ‘Teenagers at Risk in Britain Today: Towards New Policy Solutions’, I spoke on ‘Youth Policy’ after dedicated presentations on the following issues:

- Racism
- Poverty
- Sexual Health
- Families

- Crime
- Homelessness
- Mental Health
- Plus ça change, plus reste la même chose?

The recent 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth included in its Final Declaration the following endorsement of the need for youth research:

We express appreciation for the cooperation between the Council of Europe and the European Commission in the areas of youth research and youth work and call on both institutions to strengthen their collaboration beyond existing programmes.

We emphasise the importance of youth research as a foundation for evidence- based youth policy, ensuring that policy decisions are informed by robust data, analysis and the realities faced by young people.

Yet we must stand back from this generic exhortation, adopt more critical reflection and engage with the following questions:

- What kinds of collaboration between research and policy?
- What are credible and appropriate methodologies?
- What kinds of ‘evidence’?
- What kinds of platforms are needed to debate the evidence?
- Which ‘young people’ are we talking about?

I do not need to go into detail about the old cliché that young people are not a homogeneous group. There are the valued, the vulnerable and the villains, all commanding rather different research inquiry and policy responses. There are the known young people and the majority of unknown ‘ordinary kids’ who rarely come to political and policy attention. Many young people’s experiences are shaped as much by other things, such as race, gender or disability, as by their age; we must not overlook intersectionality.

In terms of research, there are frameworks of inquiry that demand debate. They attract different methodologies and provide different results. There is *comparative* research that looks at the circumstances of different cohorts at similar points in time, or within the same cohort, over time. There is *contemporary* snapshot inquiry. There is *contextual* exploration as we have discussed, space and place is important. There is *continual* inquiry, longitudinal study of lives unfolding over time (like my 50 years ethnography of the ‘Milltown Boys’). There is research that considers *connections* – the interconnected mosaic of young people’s life worlds. And there is research that probes into *clusters* of young people, grouped together on particular criteria. All approaches invoke different blends of methodology.

And then we have to ask, as many at this conference have done, what are we/you going to do with that research? What are the formats for dissemination? Do people read books any more? There is always the question of research ‘translation’, demystifying the complexities of research for the wider world, especially those with influence on policy.

There is almost certainly a need to secure political championship to gain policy traction. To what extent does/should political lobbying have a place in the process? There may also be value in considering how to build professional alliances to support advocacy for the emergent findings of research. In short, this is all about forging effective links between research and policy. Some research strikes a chord almost immediately. Some is a slow burner but may get there in the end. A great deal of research never finds a place in the policy arena.

My slide show presentation then went on to consider some of the issues entailed in, first, making some of those connections and forging those partnerships. As one panellist noted, the challenge is to connect all segments of the youth sector 'to the heat of today's issues through stories, lived experience and research knowledge – deepening collective understanding through shared collaborative activity and joint discussions.'

One participant suggested that this conference was a 'pivotal moment in strange times'. Just as one presenter argued for a paradigm shift, so others argued the case for 're- grouping', 're- focusing' and 're-aligning'. The relatively 'safe' - arguably 'golden age' - window of the past 20 years, of democracy, participation and human rights, can no longer be taken for granted, as international frameworks experience dismantling or non- compliance and national and local freedoms are compromised. There is a need to return to 'struggle'.

Fighting for spaces for association, activities and participation becomes more imperative, given the 'fluctuating relationships' between governments and civil society. The case for building stronger bridges between key actors in civil society is palpable. This may demand attention to new, alternative paths, rather than seeking just to defend what has prevailed in the past. Do we need more safe spaces for dialogue and development?

Research, youth organisations, activism and governance need to pay particular attention to what surveys and other research instruments are *not* telling us. There appears to be a growing 'youth divide' in Europe. The EU Youth Report may tell us that one-third of young people are 'engaged'. But what about the 'disengaged': what are they doing, what are they thinking? Their 'perspectives' are also important? Where do they figure in the youth 'mainstreaming' agenda? Perhaps we need to step beyond the youth sector and consider the 'youth research' of others, to provide a more balanced set of views about how young people in Europe (both those from Europe and those originally from elsewhere) are living their lives. The work of Daniel Briggs springs to mind.

And so, to conclude, there are some clear 'End Points' to this conference. We have explored myriad policy issues through the lens of recent research activity by the Youth Partnership, the Council of Europe and the European Commission. A new EU Youth Strategy is in preparation and there has recently been a Council of Europe Youth Ministers' meeting in Malta, the first for 13 years.

So it is **early days** to be mapping a strategic direction for the coming years. Policy development and implementation **takes time**, especially when some 'old' questions remain unresolved and 'new' questions have arisen. Perhaps one seminal observation was that "We have become very sectoral", that the youth sector has been a victim of its own success. When I was young, it did not exist. Over my generation, it has become an entity and cemented its identity. Now, in very changed circumstances, it is arguably the time for **taking stock** of progress (and regression) to date, and to consider the **need to re- position** – to **reconnect** with the shifting political framework and institutional landscape, in order to engage effectively with the **new realities** facing young people in Europe today.