

The importance of youth work

by Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union Youth



Pascal Smet Minister for Youth of the Flemish Community



Children and young people are the only capital our country really has. By extension, this applies to the entire European Union. In Belgium's three communities we have a long tradition of working with this age group, and we have developed interesting practices we would like to share with the rest of Europe. Youth work is precious to us because it has a value on its own. It is also service oriented and essential to the continued development of a balanced and just society.

To me, youth work means in the first place the safeguarding of a safe and controlled space for children and young people to freely explore the world without the help of parents or other adults. In this

space, children and young people are allowed to make mistakes without being called to account, and can therefore learn from their mistakes. Youth work is also an autonomous space in which they learn to take on responsibility. In all of these processes, children and young people of different backgrounds and visions come together and discover that it is perfectly possible to differ in opinion while realising projects supported by all.

Youth work is also a space where play prevails over results, because this is the best way to encourage young people to take initiatives. This space helps them grow into strong, versatile and responsible people. It is here, in this youth work space, that our European society of today and tomorrow takes shape.

Isabelle Weykmans Minister for Youth of the German-speaking Community



Investing in youth means investing in a better society. This consequently means investing in the present and the future. Young people are key actors in the development of our society and their potential cannot be wasted if we want to build a solidly united Europe based on tolerance and mutual respect.

To foster the development and employability of young people's potential to the full, they need well-adapted opportunities for learning, (self-)expression, self-esteem and experiences. Youth policy should therefore put young individuals at the centre and focus on the specific capacities of each.

School does not play an exclusive role in teaching and procuring knowledge, skills, personal and professional capacities. The non-formal education provided by youth organisations, youth centres and youth services on a voluntary basis and during leisure time also puts the acquirement of knowledge, capacities and skills as well as self-development, participation and autonomy of young people into the centre of its efforts. It helps young people to participate in society and enhances their lives in general. It therefore plays an important and complementary role in education.



Youth work promotes out-of-school learning without the pressure to perform, reaches the individual and accepts young people where they are and the way they are. Youth work deals with the present and prepares the future of many young individuals. It is a flexible way of meeting needs and challenges and it often has an innovative approach. It also creates a free space for young people, where

they have the opportunity for trial and error. Furthermore it is often open for co-operation and sharing experiences.

That is why youth work is essential for the benefit of society in general and for young people in particular.

Evelyn Huytbroeck Minister for Youth of the French Community



Youth work enables young people to practise democracy and helps them to discover their full potential by providing them opportunities for creative projects and self-expression, experimental fields of communication and negotiation, meeting spaces and areas of respect.

It gives them access to learning and, at the same time, entertainment.

Youth work is also a mainstay of what is called 'non-formal education', which is supplementary to education at school or within families. By allowing young people to undertake projects, to innovate, to test their abilities, to take responsibilities and to have a critical perspective on what they have undertaken, youth work encourages them to take on an active role in society. Youth work also provides an opportunity to learn skills which are useful throughout life.

Youth workers are key actors in this process. As they are experts, it is important to support and valorise them in their daily work. In the French Community, the field of youth work is very specific and the professionalisation of the sector has accelerated in recent years. Youth workers, whether paid or voluntary, are often young people themselves. The training of these professionals is very important. The quality of their work must be recognised and promoted beyond the youth work field.

Whether for the youngsters taking advantage of youth work or youth workers themselves, the guideline is the same in the daily building of an active, responsible, critical and united citizenship. Opening a dialogue with young people, taking their opinions into account and effectively involving them in developing policies that concern them are essential, for young people, and for the society as a whole, now and in the future.