

Youth work in great demand

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The Council of Europe and its Directorate for Youth and Sport have a long-standing, 40-year-old long tradition of promoting youth work and empowering those who carry out the manifold activities of youth work, namely professional and volunteer youth workers and youth leaders. It has always been a struggle to gain better recognition of youth work's value for society, its impact on young people's lives and to give greater visibility to what is done by youth workers in a wide variety of contexts and approaches. Most likely it is this variety that makes it difficult for 'outsiders' to understand what youth work is and the role it plays in the lives of young people.

As Peter Lauritzen has put it, 'Youth work is a summary expression for activities with and for young people of a social, cultural, educational or political nature. Increasingly, youth work activities also include sports and services for young people. Youth work belongs to the domain of "out-of-school" education, most commonly referred to as either non-formal or informal learning. The general aims of youth work are the integration and inclusion of young people in society. It may also aim towards the personal and social emancipation of young people from dependency and exploitation. Youth work belongs both to the social welfare and to the educational systems.

This complexity hinders the development of a clear picture, or better image, of youth work. The diverse definitions and histories of youth work in



various countries do not facilitate a clearer understanding of youth work today. This is also reflected in the professional profiles of youth workers, who are learning facilitators but can also be advisers, social pedagogues or social workers and, in many cases, these roles and functions are combined.

It is true that the main objective of youth work is to provide opportunities for young people to shape their own futures. However, more and more, youth work has to deal with marginalisation, social exclusion, unemployment and educational failure. Thus youth work has links to activities which traditionally have been the responsibility of social and welfare services. It often works with particular groups of young people, disadvantaged youth in socially deprived neighbourhoods, or immigrant youths including refugees and asylum seekers. Youth welfare services have thus become a very specific part of youth work with a very distinct focus and very distinct approaches, such as informing, advising, assisting, as well as protecting, controlling, intervening, limiting, excluding and even patronising.

It goes without saying that there is a risk of overloading youth work with objectives, tasks and responsibilities, particularly when other systems of integration fail. Nevertheless, it is the right time to start further reflection on a new role for youth work in Europe, as was initiated by the European Union and the Council of Europe. In this respect, this 'Coyote extra' and the Belgian EU Presidency Convention play a crucial role in developing youth work (and youth policy) further.