

Chapter 1

Interview with Harald Hartung on youth and health

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Q 1: Taking into consideration the economic, social and political developments on our continent, how “healthy” (in terms of living conditions, well-being, opportunities, etc.) do you think is the present and near future for young people in contemporary Europe?

The crisis has hit many aspects of the lives of this generation of young people – education, work, social and civic participation or health. Yet, the roughly 90 million young people in the EU are a diverse group. There are young people with relatively easy access to opportunities, but the gap between them and less advantaged groups is widening. Often disadvantages are not evenly spread: some groups of young people appear to end up with most of the disadvantages. Too often, education reproduces existing socio-economic patterns and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk of becoming “NEET” (not in education, employment or training). Unemployment, impoverishment or inadequate housing can also lead to mental health problems such as depression, substance abuse or suicide.

The situation of young people on the wrong side of the divide is alarming. Not investing in the human and social potential of all young people will hamper future economic growth. Jobs are important, but not the sole answer to guaranteeing the inclusion of young people and ensuring their sense of belonging to the communities in which they live. Young people who feel left out, excluded or marginalised for any reason can develop antisocial lifestyles, and negative sentiments can turn to hostility. We have witnessed a growing attraction to radical or anti-democratic ideas. The terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen have shown what can happen if these ideas are taken to extremes.

Q2: What constitutes a “healthy” response from a youth policy perspective that could contribute to young people’s empowerment, social inclusion, participation and well-being?

Young people are Europe’s main asset for the future, and they deserve our support. Employment, social inclusion, participation, health and well-being behave as communicating vessels, so we need to address the situation of young people in a rounded way. Based on our understanding of the interaction between these factors, we need to trigger a process of turning vicious circles into virtuous ones. This calls for coherent policy responses across sectors, and for pooling our available resources.

“Healthy” responses should focus on making young people skilled and resilient, so that they can cope with adverse experiences and challenges. We should also make sure that their concerns are heard by decision makers and that young people are given the chance to develop their own contributions to civil society.

This is a task for all those who work with, support and take decisions about young people, schools, youth workers, health professionals, cultural institutions, sports clubs and so on. These organisations should work together so that their efforts are coherent and serve the full range of interests of young people. The underlying thread, which is to consider the interests of young people as a whole, cuts through the EU Youth Strategy that governs the co-operation between the European Commission and member states in the youth field.

Cross-sectoral co-operation should be pursued from local level all the way up to international forums. At local level this can, for instance, be through single access points for young people to get advice from a multidisciplinary team, as in France and Belgium, in Houses for Teens in Denmark and in Headspace centres in Ireland. At EU level, we can bring together expertise and knowledge to support national, regional and local approaches.

Q3: What are, in concrete terms, the priorities and actions of your institution in this regard?

Given that youth policy is first and foremost a national competence, the European Commission co-ordinates and complements efforts in member states through gathering comparative evidence and examples of good practice. In the spirit of mainstreaming youth issues, EU youth policy also facilitates young people’s concerns being taken up in EU policy fields such as employment or health.

For example, the [2013] Council recommendation on establishing a Youth Guarantee calls upon member states to offer young people a job, apprenticeship, traineeship or continued education within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed.

The EU’s health policy gives specific attention to young people as regards nutrition and physical activity, alcohol, smoking, sexual health or drug use. For example, within the EU’s Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related Health Issues, an action plan addresses childhood obesity. Within the EU’s strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm, an action plan on youth drinking and heavy episodic drinking is being developed.

Q4: How do you think that youth work could contribute to providing more “healthy” prospects for young people? How do you see the role of youth work and its limits?

An EU study on the value of youth work confirmed its role in supporting young people’s personal and social development. It confirmed that youth work assists in youth empowerment, emancipation, tolerance and responsibility, leading in turn to participation in democratic societies, prevention of high risk behaviour and social inclusion and cohesion.

Given the effects of the crisis, in recent years the demand for youth work has increased, as have pressures on youth work. The challenges for young people have of course changed, but at the same time, the nature of challenges is changing. For example,

the omnipresence of the Internet and social media in young people's lives raises the need for media and digital literacy and has effects on the delivery of youth work. Also, given the growing complexity and interrelations between young people's challenges, youth workers increasingly need to be open to partnerships and co-operation with other support providers. For example, the increasing demand for transversal skills, or 21st-century skills, makes the recognition of youth work outcomes more relevant. Such co-operation should ideally be shaped in a way that allows youth work to preserve its identity and unique contribution to young people and this might sometimes be challenging. Last but not least, since the crisis, budgets have been cut in many cases and sustainable funding remains a concern.

Adapting to new realities in this context is challenging, but not impossible. Reflections and recommendations about how to handle such challenges and about the future for youth work were summarised in the declaration made at the 2nd Youth Work Convention organised under the Belgian chairmanship of the Council of Europe in April 2015.

In May 2015, the Council of Youth Ministers adopted conclusions on reinforcing youth work, highlighting its contribution to personal development, social inclusion, cultural diversity and active citizenship, announcing the development of a reference and guidance tool on quality youth work to support national youth work services and facilities, ensuring transparency and quality for young people.