Chapter 10

Reflections on a lifetime of engagement in the youth field – Persisting questions

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INTRODUCTION

To take a personal view on the meaningful international involvement of young people is a welcome opportunity. This is a fairly subjective and culturally biased view stretching over 40 years. It will concentrate mainly on developments in the wider Europe.

Although I have worked with China for over 20 years, had sporadic projects with several African countries, run a volunteers' scheme in Sri Lanka, talked policy co-operation with Japan, Argentina and Mexico, and even spent time on a strategy for youth engagement with the USA, it is the European neighbourhood that has taught me most about the possibilities, and the realities, of that elusive "meaningful" intercultural connection.

Through some ad hoc selective illustration, I would like to consider a few basic questions that we always seem to need to deal with so that our individual ability to improve the way we work is more effective.

The rapidly rolling calendar of history does not permit us to dwell on a "done deal", a "safe haven", a "job completed" or a "journey ended". Change is the norm. If only the positives learned during such change were also the norm!

Recently, I revisited the site of Petra, in Jordan. My first visit was a very time-pressured one during the launch conference of the EuroMed Youth Programme in 1996. The massive complex overlay of history stands there starkly. The Nabataeans, an astute trading tribe, settling over 2 000 years ago, built their links as far as India and China. The profits of trade allowed a great show of self-proclaiming buildings and sophisticated social architecture, held together for generations, in a unique setting, by the force of battle and the nuance of diplomacy. By 106 (CE), this kingdom was annexed to the Roman Empire. Next came the spread of Christianity; the impact of Islam in the region; and, ultimately, the all-embracing arms of cultural tourism.

Walking among the ruins, it is easy to see the layers of influence and the absorption of one set of values into the functions of another: temples become churches; burial chambers become houses; murals lie undisturbed; and marble artefacts disappear. However, throughout the timescale the whole site is skilfully sustained by a drainage and irrigation system so carefully calculated that it still looks, today, ready to serve its purpose. The best structures are adaptable; the most valuable are timeless.

To consider how we have intervened to involve and to use the meeting of young people as a tool for cultural and economic diplomacy, it is useful to look at some of the enabling structures, partly as historical indicators, but also as systems that enabled social change. Many of those structures working today were very active in varied ways 40 years ago and have constantly changed.

FEELING APART

Question: What did I learn from feeling like a stranger?

In the context of "mobility" it does not take long to realise that the crossing of a border is all at once political, physical, social, cultural and generational.

In order to close the gaps and remove the threats from each other externally (and to keep things calm internally), the international policies of many nations were summed up as: get to know my (high) culture; learn my language; buy my goods; and, thereby, be my friend. Nation-building, externally, was a strong commodity for internal consumption. Reputation and economics were allied.

My first meeting, when I started international work in 1975, was to attend a young workers' forum at UNESCO, in Paris. In a very large conference room filled with serious, competent officials, I felt a complete and ill-prepared stranger.

The next week I was at a Youth Service meeting in Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom – never, then, far from our news pages – where I felt a complete and ill-prepared stranger.

As the months moved on, another task was liaising with the Romany Guild in London to prepare some British Roma families to travel through France to the Camargue (for the baptism of the horses) to be filmed by the BBC. I felt a complete and ill-prepared stranger. This feeling became even more acute when I spent three weeks living with them on the road in France.

Another duty was to attend an austere committee of the Royal Commonwealth Society in a large room of oak-panelled splendour. As I sat in leather chairs surrounded by old men in older suits, speaking eloquently over a heap of paper files, I felt a complete and ill-prepared stranger.

I realised that institutions are organic, deep, restless bodies, dominated by personality. I understood that history can bring prejudice and grievance in large amounts. I appreciated that I had a culture apart from others, and others valued their culture being apart.

STRUCTURES: INTERNATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL, INTERCULTURAL, MULTICULTURAL

Question: How do we structure and facilitate the way people meet?

I was employed by a government-sponsored agency and given the job of building programmes for young people to improve their understanding of the world, which, in turn, helped to improve my country's reputation, and also, by some not so visible process, achieve greater prosperity and keep us at peace. That was an unwritten theory, with perhaps much less good practice. In reality, out in the world, it was all something that took place through the energy of a dispersed group of like-minded individuals; linking community interests of a particular cultural bias, and a genuine, yet ill-organised set of youth movements that lurked below the established surface and who were ready to break down many, many barriers.

There were very limited available and accessible international opportunites for young people. There was a strong historical series of volunteering programmes. Their objectives varied. Volunteering was, and is, for individuals, or for a small group, or a buddy system. A more focused process of bringing together numbers of young people under their ownership of their interests needed serious investment. This was putting groups of young people together, not simply to study formally, as on a campus, but to meet as equals and to develop partnerships which would invigorate those points of common interest. From the formal, governmental political perspective, this needed to be done in carefully orchestrated, managed structures.

The best known structure in this field was the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO) – a unique, and never to be repeated, phenomenon of post-World War Two strategic thinking. Other countries had neither the resources, nor the will, nor perhaps the reason, to create an operational body managed bilaterally, running and supporting youth projects, school links and civic agreements. The FGYO stands alone, but there were other routes to the same objective, if destined to become vulnerable to political mood, as their operational structures were also responsible for handling public money.

Nearly all what were called "Western" European countries held regular bilateral mixed commissions. As part of the foreign relations platform with "friendly" states, this was a processing route for government support (including cash) which would also give some better guarantee that an event, conference or programme would happen, because both sides had agreed it. Under these elaborate deals, several countries had chosen to form a youth sub-committee. It was here that the precious governmental funds for youth projects, high-level youth-focused events, and mutually agreed schemes could be approved.

By far, the UK Government's major youth partner was the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). There were over 1 200 civic links (or town twinning as the British preferred) with the FRG and a similar number of school links.

It was an important shade of emphasis that "youth" exchange became a concept in its own right. Formal education looked after its own business and the high-level cultural world absorbed "scrubbed up" youth cultural activity. So, we were able to deal with youth issues and examine the priorities that public funding could achieve for youth projects, study visits, and special programmes of activity (this item allowing some developmental initiative). On any scale of financial measurement, though, "youth" funds were small.

In this same structured process, next for the UK in volume of business, came France, then formal arrangements with Italy, less formal with the Netherlands, and later, among others, Portugal and Spain. From memory, the FRG's second largest formal youth partner was Israel. The geopolitical message was hard at work.

We also had agreements with ministries in countries such as Israel, Japan and the USA – all without funds attached. This was perhaps specifically British. There was no intended ideological interference by the system to prevent youth coming together to subvert the system. It was the earmarking, the specificity, of funding, that civil servants avoided energetically. If a department of government dispensed public funds that had too clear an identity, those funds were exposed to be cut. This became an endless financial game that still plays.

Countries of "eastern" Europe had more restrictive cultural agreements which were both detailed and stifling. However, under a general clause on youth and student co-operation, the agreements approved youth study tours; language learning summer courses; sports events and cultural performances; and, occasionally, an elementary exchange of youth leaders. The last exchanges, on the eastern side were quite often the not-so-young of the party youth wing, and on the UK side predominantly student-based and tourist Marxists, who wanted to see what elsewhere really was like.

In a very British committed affection for the past, we also set up the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council (CYEC). It was managed by grants from the Foreign Office, plus contributions from local government, who became active members. The governance of CYEC took some strong inclusive steps. Youth organisations were at the table for decision making on funding applications and discussion of priorities. Looking at a fluctuating membership of plus or minus 50 Commonwealth countries the founders' hope was to create a trans-Commonwealth youth exchange programme, open to all and supporting the most in need. This was not to be so.

As with many Commonwealth structures, the ideology is quite sound, has broad democratic and inclusive goals, has significant support as a concept, but no way of deepening funding. This is an example of something we know in youth programmes elsewhere, endemically.

UNESCO and the UN had similar well-intentioned youth participation concepts. As for funding, they were impoverished and unsupported by their member countries with regard to the movement of young people, with some small exceptions in volunteering and conference representation. They had no access points to communities, nor outreach to interest groups which were driving from the bottom upwards.

The Council of Europe, in principle, seemed a much more flexible and user-friendly body, if mind-numbingly difficult to understand in practice – not just in terms of how it worked, but why. Youth was on the Council of Europe agenda. There were meetings for non-governmental bodies who had youth as their constituency, and there was a small pool of funds for assisting youth councils and other youth structures to develop. This was, of course, something useful, but something remote and hard to reach.

The standout structure for funding; engagement and policy development; where there was political will for cohesion, would be the EU.

MODEL EUROPE

Question: What do we take with us from systems and structures to save, utilise and develop?

The political edginess of EU affairs seems mostly to have been British-inspired, very often through criticism of cost and value, underscored with political protection of identity and subsidiarity. The officials and the leaders of the "European Project" countered this with a move to the people-centred approach – under the banner of a "People's Europe". What would matter would be greater mobility, educational opportunity and sharing good practice. This would be enshrined in improved, new and far-reaching programmes of activity.

I had a meeting with a European Commission official in December 1982. We discussed how youth programmes internationally worked in the UK in a vaguely useful sort of way. From continuing rounds of discussion, it became clear that the Commission was embarking, through wide-ranging consultation, on a whole range of more people-centred programmes, and that a youth mobility programme was a distinct possibility. This, for our work, would be a fresh breeze blowing over the structural funds and customs tariff reduction that seemed to obsess EU debate. A focused series of papers, meetings and inputs took place with great positivity and great hope. This would end in the formulation of Youth for Europe in July 1988.

The aim was to take the best practice of the multilateral institutions (including the Council of Europe Youth Foundation), the bilateral intergovernmental working groups and formal committees on youth exchange, and ally any programme to the essential mobility clauses of the Treaty of Rome.

Article 50 of the Treaty of Rome supported the limited, but fairly adequately funded, exchange of young workers to improve their basic skills. This article allowed small groups to be sent on medium-term individual placements. Not surprisingly, willing uptake in the pro-European lobby came from the Young Farmers' associations, which made best use of these funds. As a colleague observed, language should not be a problem for, after all, a pig is a pig. "Article 50. Member States shall, within the framework of a joint programme, encourage the exchange of young workers" – Treaty of Rome March 1957.

So, developments were possible on a legal basis. Intervention in secondary education was still a hot political issue, which meant that good things for youth outside of the formal school setting could have an independent life. Higher education co-operation was given the Erasmus programme. It had a smooth inception backed by articulate academics and graduate-qualified civil servants. Despite the pressure to leave core education alone, schools could not be left out and had SOCRATES as a solidly funded programme. The original young workers were easily transformed into a more rounded programme, LEONARDO da Vinci.

No one could find an eponymous programme title from a mythological deity, or outstanding European figure, that would do for "youth". There was a fleeting discussion around YES for Europe (Youth Exchange Scheme) but an anglophone title was way beyond political agreement at the top levels. Youth for Europe in its abstract form emerged into general use during 1989, with a clear set of objectives and a funding process.

So, we had structure in place that shared transnationally the issues, challenges and contributions that youth organisations could make to the diplomatic landscape. The use of "organisations" is crucial here, because that was the only way to secure some kind of youth voice – organised youth and established organisations were first in line to benefit. For those who were seeking wider, deeper youth representation, as always, they were challenged with "Why choose them and not us?" There was a constant theoretical angst about youth representation. But first we needed something that was up and working to fight over.

There was significant preparatory time debating how to maximise support for the constituency – disparate as it was – and with a listening, yet cautious Commission, all member states fought for clear priorities. This led to two core points: a system of national agencies for the programme, with significant devolved decision making, and a written priority that projects should focus on communities of the "less advantaged". I will say something below about the latter point, but comment on the structural point brought in by the national agencies first.

The national agencies (NAs) were to be the third side of the triangle of Commission, member states' officials, and the programme users. This was bound to lead to conflict in several ways. Some member states would not relinquish, nor had the power to do so, decision making on public funds to a non-accountable structure, as defined by their appropriate law. Most set up something, with a firmly placed hand on the shoulder of the agencies' operation. However, the NAs had now a peer group to link with, and they had an ever-thickening line of communication to the Commission.

Many of the NAs immediately launched national consultations on the Youth for Europe (YFE) content and uptake. The finer points of grant percentages would take up whole meetings. But whole meetings would also be spent on involvement of minorities, gender equality, innovation in training and outreach to the remote rural edges and urban housing estates of the European landscape. Not all of this was met with national approval – a commitment to a policy idea is a commitment to spending in practice. The Commission more or less allowed the discussion to flow. This was not the world of formal education, the aspirations of universities, the bottom-line of business – this was the stuff of European society.

Common issues of youth policy were hard to agree on because once the step was taken to follow the analysis that always meant funding. Even by the end of the 1990s, it was the Commission, through its White Paper on "Youth" (European Commission 2001), which took on board the discussion of a European Youth Policy – intangible to this day, but a debate worth having – and at the very least to agree on priorities – even unfunded priorities.

As best they could, limited by size of budget, and competing youth political forces seeking their funds, the NAs moved the programme forward towards new ideas for mobility and new geographies as the EU continued its expansion. An official NAs meeting was held in Bruges in November 1990, the first "official" programme meeting outside Brussels. My diary notes bilateral co-operation, under the programme, with Slovakia (1995), Poland (1996), Slovenia (1998) and Turkey (1999) – a slow, gradualist process. However, the real momentum was for the multilateral.

The end product of the initial phases of YFE was a strong network of self-standing and politically active NAs, plus a no-going-back message that multilateral activity, at all levels, had replaced bilateral arrangements. The European programmes had disseminated the formal principle that European activity existed for a more complex interaction by young people. How this could be achieved in relation to principles demanded, equally strongly by the field, for inclusiveness and accessibility, was the source of a corporate headache.

In parallel to building a set of national agencies for programmes, the Commission opened an envelope for funding trans-European youth structures, seeking new possibilities and underpinning the best of the old. This borrowed heavily from the Council of Europe leading, at least structurally, to Youth Partnership between the Council of Europe and the EU in the field of youth.

The most important youth body the Commission supported was the European Youth Forum (EYF). With a certain patchy pedigree the original European, World and UN-type youth hierarchies had attracted a powerful set of individual representatives, with governmental support that varied from total control to total disinterest, but no set of policies or arguments that meant much to the street. With a solid chunk of guaranteed funding, the EYF would report to the Commission and to member states through a work plan and consultation at a political level.

For me, coming from the national agency and governmental perspective, the EYF meant debate with some outstanding individuals; vigorous meetings, and a growing series of papers about what needed to be done, with less equivalent report-back on what had been done. It seems an important training ground for political leadership. It may appear to the outsider, the struggling youth project, a door half shut rather than a door half open.

As all the European programmes developed, there were additions and contractions. There were economic housekeepers who would have preferred one large pyramidic European mobility programme, with one set of reporting procedures. It was clear to the youth lobby that this would mean the demise, dilution and dispersal of clear and sustainable youth policy intervention. For over a decade the Youth for Europe programme played a role in gathering intelligence about social change, created a massive range of youth networks, and set up innovative systems for consultation. It did not welcome consolidation.

However, with pressure on public funding, as ever, and constitutional change being pressed by the EU leadership, consolidation was a reality. As treaty change was being rolled out during 2004/05 the Commission began drawing up a single Lifelong Learning Programme. This would be the next structure. But the outcome of the French referendum on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, in May 2005, was a victory for the "No" campaign, with 55% of voters rejecting the treaty. In the Netherlands, 61% rejected the proposal. On analysis it was clear, contrary to internal belief, that youth were no more for a more legally constituted EU than their elders.

With some dexterity the Commission led the argument that there needed to be a sharper focus on youth engagement. The investment in youth was not complete – a different animal than study, training and trading. So, the Youth Programme survived alongside Lifelong Learning. But, finally, after the major economic failure of financial services erupting in 2008, currently still felt, the latest overarching grand mobility programme is in place with Erasmus+. There are youth chapters with the same intentions on exchange of good practice, policy and network building. However, the process as the programme moves forward may not live up to that initial, now obscured priority that there should be a clear set of opportunities to include the "less advantaged".

It is not always a straightforward progression, as structures evolve, for practice to evolve more positively.

SOME THEMES AND ISSUES THAT COULD NOT BE IGNORED

Question: How do we safeguard our principles in long-term practice?

To look at a few of the themes that have developed over the years, an observer might feel angst that not much has changed in the lives of whole sections of young people. During 2012, in the midst of the second International Youth Year, a colleague from Open Society Foundations did a liberal addition of the cost of international youth events as posted on the UN calendar during the year. With some confidence, considering items such as travel, staffing, and donated time, the hundreds of activities covering important, sharp and incisive agendas came to over a billion US dollars. This left us to open an argument around the webpage headline: "A billion spent and no change".

Landmark events that let off steam, even with quality representation and articulate critiques of public policy, were doomed by their finiteness to be mere debating cul-de-sacs, off-road, going nowhere, or even worse were given a "thanks, but no thanks" response by the audience.

There is a tendency to re-invent the old in the image of the new. Getting stuff done and making it work bears the greatest risk.

A cornerstone in international youth mobility has been volunteering. It has existed for many years, for various motivations – ideological; faith-based; political; calls for justice; and a route for individual escape. This last point led to the real difficulty in managing many volunteering schemes. Such was the havoc caused by homesick, depressed and uncontrollable 18-21-year-old volunteers that, in the late 1970s, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) thought long and hard about taking inexperienced and poorly skilled volunteers into very challenging, underdeveloped social environments. They simply stopped recruiting young people.

That policy has come full circle for VSO with a carefully nurtured induction policy. However, volunteering throughout the 1980s did not take off to soak up significant numbers, in particular as national military service was increasingly disbanded across Europe. It was not until the European programmes were well underway in the 1990s that volunteering was given a fresh remake (or a concept hijacked, as some argued).

European Voluntary Service (EVS), announced in a European Commission White Paper on Education and Training (European Commission 1995), came into the second phase of Youth for Europe. EVS can produce quality experiences, with necessary and essential preparation and guidance. However, the unexpected exposes us all. During the first period of the UK EVS operations, we had three young people die through accident and self-harm, and two arrested for theft and menacing behaviour. Those events challenged us and we saw our areas of weakness – some in the placement, a lot in the preparation – and we felt starkly the ambiguity of open, inclusive recruitment.

Because EVS is focused on individuals, it gave the programme managers better awareness of micro-management and quality decision making. It also began to fully open our eyes on who was accountable for what when we pursued mobility schemes.

Other key issues were not so much in the operational area, but in outreach and accessibility. The initiatives to kick-start these were by no means original – planning consultations at national level; working groups to set objectives; meetings with the Commission. Then, up went the hand of a member state to host the kick-off event.

I give three examples from the UK side.

During the 1990s, there was a positive coming together by youth organisations and the NAs on the issues of disadvantage and social inclusion. This is never an easy path. It exposes our own ignorance of culture and social hierarchies. It pushes us to create new favourites. It drives us to quotas.

The UK hosted, in Gateshead (1991), our first superficial European-wide attempt to engage with disadvantaged youth. It was clear that, unless within our particular hinterland of national youth policy the same inclusive priorities operated, the chance of success would be limited. This was probably true for all participants. We knew our limitations. On the basis of that, or nothing, we continued with the message that this was an open European programme. The challenge was taken up. The practice evidence of what happened next is less easy to sum up and examine.

The second change-making workshop we hosted was in Bradford (1994), which considered the access of minority cultures to European programmes. We not only exposed differing national and local strategies to the issue, but we began to understand different sets of values. There was quality debate; ideas were put to the test; personal prejudices examined honestly. It was, by whatever definition, accepted that inadequate as Youth for Europe was, the other EC programmes were not even seriously considering these inclusiveness issues.

Moving forward 20 years it would become unthinkable that any youth/education meeting would not be dealing with multi-faith questions and be highly aware of the complexity of race and identity.

A third area where I believe the Youth Programme took the lead was on child protection. There was considerable good practice embedded in country legislation and civil society bodies, but it was sparse and often untested. There were nightmare possibilities. Who vetted volunteers? Who did risk assessment for a host partner 1 000 km away? Who really knew the individual participants, their behaviours, their backgrounds? Youth work was under scrutiny. There was some darkness surrounding the hard-to-reach issue of abuse and psychological harm.

This hit us in 1999 when a senior British police officer produced an analysis of child abuse in English language schools. There were hundreds of these unregulated schools, using families as hosts. Each summer some 800 000 teenage young people came to England unaccompanied. Youth organisations were adamant that they took child protection seriously, but the mass influx on language trips shone a harsh light on youth mobility in general. International youth projects were tarnished by association.

We responded. A large European meeting shared doubts and proposed solutions. A working group set up by the Commission revised funding application procedures; insisted on closer scrutiny of leaders and volunteers; pressed member states to revise legislation; developed a form of mutual risk assessment for both hosting and sending groups, and individuals. Guidelines and a help site were established. There was an effect.

Consideration of these quite large-scale initiatives, reflecting support from 20+ countries, reveals the pace of change as being overly slow. Radical answers cause us difficulty. To respond and move forward across societies is perhaps a more demanding process than moving practice across cultures. State systems are robustly structured – they resist disturbance. Like-minded cultures will adapt more quickly to change. To some extent that is a headline in itself for "youth culture" – it progresses in spite of external intervention. It has its own vitality.

Much practice in international youth work remains in the areas of joint study visits, exchange of people and ideas, combined projects, seminars, conferences and workshops – the tools of the trade – augmented in the advancing technologies by webinars and online face-time. The really big issues diminish and return; an ebb and tidal flow often distant from public policy.

What really changes people is why people are meeting each other: for active curiosity; for making change happen; to be refreshed by difference; to be better equipped to make change real. I hope so.

THE LINK TO POLICY, OR NOT

Question: How does what happens somewhere else matter to what happens where you live?

Things happen. Policy is shaped by research and evidence. Then it happens to you and around you. In the international youth field there have been some valuable handshakes from the centre to the policy makers, and vice versa.

The development of training for youth organisations by the European Youth Programme has strong links to local needs. There is an excellent, but limited example – SALTO.

The oddly named SALTO training support strands of the Youth Programme (their origins around 2003) are excellent examples of responses to wider needs. The limited funds for the SALTO units have allowed them to punch strongly above their weight. They improved the political understanding of "new" programme member countries, as they arrived into the programme, by providing real local expertise. They tackled good operational practice and quality preparation. They worked at improving realistic levels of inclusion, and they offered skill-building in cultural diversity.

None of this would mean very much except that the spin-off and content of the SALTO events helped inspire and inform a positive critique of national youth policies, themselves, at various levels of implementation. The ripple effect produced a network of committed individuals.

There are thousands of examples of valuable youth work practice, educational skills, and strengthening human resources, at a thousand levels from all forms of international events. The impact for the individual cannot be underestimated. What has some way to go is the impact on policy development.

To achieve any part of this policy and practice costs considerable amounts of money – to not only operate at a significant level, but to monitor and sustain. International youth work deserves better scrutiny, and a more visible policy platform.

THE MONEY THING

Question: How was the money spent and was it worth it?

As cited, the Article 50 Young Worker Exchange Programme was the only EU source of funds for a very long time. I was more than pleased to, literally, get my hands on it, in 1976, with an idea to run a European Young Fishermen's conference. A very amiable senior official in the EC Agriculture and Fisheries Directorate General did the application for me, while I sat in his office. Young fishermen, on the open seas, did not get on well with each other. There were actual "cod wars". We thought we would bring numbers of them together as a force of good. To make that more interesting, we chose Northern Ireland as a host venue.

During the event I was paid in cash – I recall Belgian currency, as the ecu was not widely available. The point of this story: not all European funding transactions are this smooth.

National bilateral budgets for youth programmes had been refined to a simple formula – a percentage of travel and a percentage of hosting costs. There was a sliding-scale offering a greater percentage for greater disadvantage. To decide who got what – this is what committees are for.

On a more global scale, the first problem we suffered in the European context was additionality. If the EC brought something to fruition that had a budget, and you had that type of thing in your own country budget, the proportion of funds was deducted. So, we in UK were at first excited to have the Youth for Europe programme, only then to have almost all our existing bilateral youth funding axed.

Once you have, with "x" countries, hammered out the funding principles (it sounds easy), then comes the stampeding herd of elephants in the room – accountability. Looking at my diary notes I see in bolder letters as the years progress: annual report to the Commission; then, final three-year report to the Commission; then, meeting with Commission auditors; then, meeting for assessment with KPMG; then, with the frisson it deserves – visit by the Commission and the external auditors.

I think I can argue without contradiction that the initial enthusiasm, belief and flexibility that youth work centred programmes should have were severely tested (if not punished) by the rigorous, many say necessary, policing of expenditure. After all, the Commission had experienced the purge of its financial indelicacies, so why not us, the national agencies of the day?

Were the funds ever applied well enough to make real change? Well, to contradict the great sage, Bob Dylan, "When you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose", the youth constituency would argue, "When you ain't got nothin', a percentage of nothin' is nothin'". There was always something to fight about.

The funding provided a baseline to ask for more, or complementary, resources. As long as Europe was a friend and provider, then European money meant that you had a foothold to ask for more elsewhere.

Over time, the natural political process affects money as much as money affects policy. The second decade of the 21st century has placed China high on the EU external relations agenda with an EU–China youth agreement. This shift follows at country level, with India, Mexico, and others catching investment attention. And priorities for connection can fall victim to wider forces. The EuroMed youth initiative of the late 1990s seems alive now in intention only. Youth resources, meanwhile, at many levels, are spread even thinner.

COMMUNICATIONS: A REAL CHANGE

Question: As we communicate, do we understand each other?

A real high-impact change, both in speed and in accuracy, over the years lies solidly in communications technology. My diary of 1992, something of a watershed period in the development of systems, has me scheduled for an AMIPRO course. What it did is now forgotten. One of the national agencies' moments of change was the agreement to use fax machines (allowed to be purchased in their management grant).

In an early meeting with our partner from the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, we asked, as things had been pretty quiet, how the installing of the fax machine was going. Our helpful interpreter stopped taking notes 10 minutes into the reply. Her summary of the response was as follows: "You need to remember it is only a fax machine. Now, it has to work in an Italian Ministry".

The standards and efficiency of communication improved geometrically. We could dwell for a long time on the use of language, and the shortcomings of us native English speakers, who have exploited and often obscured good communication. That point needs attention. However, my point remains that what we say we need first to understand ourselves, and then we need to be understood.

Andrew Keen, in his book *The Internet Is Not the Answer* (Keen 2015) estimates that during every single minute of 2014 Internet users, around 3 billion of them worldwide, sent 204 million e-mails, posted 216 000 photographs, and spent US$83 000 on Amazon – every 60 seconds.

We all have some easy kind of access to information around the world. To examine it critically is our task.

JOURNEY'S END

Question: Where are we going and what are we learning?

Even if youth work has to follow the money, its contribution through non-formal learning is immense. We are certain now what non-formal learning offers. We can measure it in practical terms. It is not some spiritual belief. It brings another set of opportunities for young people; emphasising the additional capacity to reach those struggling the hardest, or those most alienated.

The youth issue, for now, will be dominated by employability, as the panacea to European dysfunction. A demographic of moody, ill-tempered young people, prone to radicalisation, feeling failed, is where the mass of investment has been forced to be directed.

Looking back, there is a history. We presented the value of international youth work at a business conference on youth unemployment in Birmingham in 1993. I have notes on an "employability" study visit by members of the European Parliament in May 1998. More recently, the report of our expert working group on Non-Formal Learning and Employability was delivered to the Commission in April 2014. This is a long road, well travelled, and has not in any way reached a destination.

Youth work can benefit from, and bring benefit to, new partners. It demands a reshaping of its workforce using the competence to deal with tough situations on the streets and in cafés, to be reinforced by the confidence to sit in boardrooms, or deal with human resource managers. It is not too difficult. A revised curriculum to scale-up youth work training can be found in existing practice (transferable, but not supplanting local priorities and interpretation).

A counter argument over time can reasonably be: mobility is easier. Most nation states are accessible, just about. Petrol is cheap. Air fares are cheaper. Take the bus, or train. Do it yourself.

Let us still argue that well-managed and thoughtful international experience can bring quality benefits to participants, and that a haunting belief remains that this could contribute to peace and prosperity.

Over the past few years, we have begun to value intercultural fluency – a way of living, surviving, translating into practice that complexity that makes us curious: by breathing a different air; smelling, tasting, hearing difference.

Intercultural fluency offers a better understanding of how we can successfully live together; work in new places; enjoy, and participate in, a globalising world, where culture is an added complexity to already complex lives.

We all need to understand ourselves within our own culture. We need to create trust across cultures, manage and resolve our conflict.

Starting young, through mobility experience, we begin building relationships. From that point, we can create a shared purpose, gaining the active support of other people in a project, joint event, or in our workplace. We continue to increase that experience to develop better team work across cultures. We become more accountable being part of a wider cultural context. The feeling is that we can shape the future.

These experiences blend seamlessly with local youth initiative. Significantly, they are also the abilities championed by employers as skills for the 21st century.

Youth work is a success story. International youth work should be too. As I noted with ancient Petra, the big structures are recycled. Not all that is of value is carried forward. But somewhere, like the water supply system, there is a structure that is more than just functional – it is life-enhancing. I think international youth work does that job, whatever the issue, whatever the economics, in spite of the politics.

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