

Youth Partnership

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COUNCIL OF EUROPE



BEYOND BARRIERS

Conference on the role of youth work in supporting young people in
vulnerable situations

Summary Report

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The Conference BEYOND BARRIERS took place in Malta on **26-27 November 2014**. It gathered about 130 experts from across the Council of Europe member states, ranging from members of youth NGOs, youth workers, practitioners, policy makers, to youth researchers (PEYR) and national correspondents (EKCYP). Most importantly, among participants were 17 young people who shared their experiences and good practices about overcoming social barriers in daily life in different geographical areas and settings. The conference had two main aims, namely to discuss challenges, role and potential of youth work supporting young people in vulnerable situations and share ideas on these aspects; to feedback on the findings of the mapping exercise “Barriers to social inclusion for young people in vulnerable situations”. Three main issues were discussed. **Firstly**, the explicit focus was on the specific **needs** of young people in vulnerable situations, respect to common needs of young people as a ‘group’, as well as on the role of youth work in overcoming some of the barriers faced by young people. With regard to this topic, experts and stakeholders focused on the structural barriers that prevent young people in vulnerable situations from partake in society on equal foot with their peers and on the interaction between young people’s agency with these

structures. The most controversial issue was to which extent **youth work** should offer a guidance and structured support to young people's needs: should youth work offer a 'structured support' in a 'fluid' society¹? Should youth work be based on precise expectations about what young beneficiaries should achieve or should it rather be 'expectation-free' and based on young people's needs? Answers to these questions derived from a concern that, increasingly, family, education systems, society at large are undergoing a radical transformation in many countries where young people can feel disoriented. At the same time, European policy seems to rely more and more on young people's resilience and activation, as vulnerable situations faced by many young people were a 'private concern' rather than a public issue. In the vacuum left by other traditional structures, youth work can accompany and provide mentorship for young people in need. Also, many barriers faced by young people are intertwined (unemployment and access to decent housing; access to documents for young migrants and their access to social rights in the host country, etc.). Different burdens (both structural and linked with stigmatized characteristics of identity) accumulate, intersect and simultaneously operate in different fields, in a way that youth policy and youth work don't manage to ensure social justice for *all* young people. For their part, youngsters at the Conference gave voice to some of their needs, by asking the 'adults' to center youth work on young people's needs and problems in the contemporary world, to offer safe places where they can experiment, try them off and build coalitions, to balance between providing guidance and leave freedom and independence. From the conference it emerged that if all young people have common needs, be they basic and material ones (e.g. food and security, health, housing, etc.) or of other kind (e.g. friendship, self-esteem, etc.), many young people in vulnerable situations have to fight hard fulfill these needs. Example of good practices presented by young participants inspired many reflections and raised the issue of how to multiply them in **different** settings and how to financially support them in a sustainable way.

Secondly, participants sought to find some shared positions and perspectives on how to enhance the visibility of youth work and its role in reducing obstacles to social inclusion. An intense debate took place on the understanding of 'youth work' and 'social inclusion'. It also touch based on the need for youth workers to liaise and communicate more effectively with young people and policy makers, in order to build trust relations that enable all young people in Europe to fulfill their full potential. There was a wide agreement that youth work is still a 'Cinderella service' in many areas and that it needs more **recognition, support** by national, supranational and international institutions and other relevant partners and **funding**.

¹ Bauman, Z. 2000. Liquid Modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Thirdly, the primary data of the “Report on barriers to social inclusion for young people in vulnerable situations” and the participants’ feedbacks to it were collected, which will inform the final report.

In conclusion, the participants had the chance to problematize the main requirements for youth work to better serve the needs of young people in vulnerable situations and to have first-hand information by some of these very youngsters themselves on the visible and invisible barriers they face in their daily life. This dialogue proved to be very helpful to understand how to support those at risk of exclusion to be protagonists in the society. Now it’s time to translate this knowledge into practice...