Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth

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Briefing 4: Review of research on the impact of COVID-19 on the youth work, youth organisations and the digitalisation of services and activities for young people

Authors: Alonso Escamilla, Irina Lonean
Editor: Lana Pasic

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1. What is the aim of this briefing?

In 2021, the monitoring and analytical work of The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership aims to enrich the findings, identify gaps and draw relevant conclusions for European and national initiatives on adapting youth policy and youth work practice to new conditions and needs triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, youth partnership continues to host and update the [Knowledge HUB: COVID-19 impact on the youth sector](#) containing the data and information sources on research related to COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on youth sector. The fourth briefing created in the framework of the Hub presents a selection of main research findings on the impact of COVID-19 on the youth sector, gathered until May 2021, with focus on youth work, youth organisations and the digitalisation of services and activities for young people.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on youth work and youth organisations

2.1. Key findings from research on youth work and youth organisations

The research on youth work in 2020 focused on the lockdown period. The first half of 2020 has been a research rich period and very useful data and studies are available on the COVID-19 impact on young people, youth workers that provided services and activities for these young people and youth organisations where this youth work happened (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020a; RAY Network, 2020a).

Data reveals that before March 2020, most of the youth work was based on involving young people in face-to-face activities and youth organisations developed their practice to provide opportunities for young people to meet, do things together and exchange directly their views on the world. Digital youth work and digital communication with young people and within youth organisations have been until 2020 complementing and additional methods to the above-mentioned activities. The pandemic changed this 'order' completely because the lockdown, physical distancing rules and other public health regulations have rendered many of the traditional contexts and methods of youth work either impossible or impractical (European Parliament, 2021).

The lockdown and the first wave of COVID-19 had a great impact on youth work and youth organisations. Surveys conducted by the EU- Council of Europe youth partnership and RAY Network showed that youth workers and youth leaders perceived the impact of COVID-19 on youth work and services provided to young people as strong and very strong, with each and every aspect of youth work changed by the pandemic and lockdown (collaboration & communication, coordination & decision-making, leadership and management, feedback, mentoring & support, volunteering) (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020a; RAY Network, 2020a, EU, 2020a).

Limited access to resources during the lockdown periods affected the capacity of youth workers and youth NGOs to provide services to young people.Organisations have been affected to a large extent, not only because they needed to change their methodologies and 'reinvent' a large part of their work and routines, but also because approximately half of the organisations surveyed lost resources: part of the budget, volunteers and even employees (RAY Network, 2020c; EU, 2020a), with some national differences (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020a). Many organisations and youth workers reported significant difficulties in finding and/or developing new methods and techniques for youth work and non-formal education in online spaces. From a rather marginal approach to youth work, online and digital approaches became, almost overnight, the only possible youth work alternatives, and this challenge was identified by all studies (RAY Network, 2020a; RAY Network, 2020b; EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020b). In this context, losses of resources are deepening the problems, because they are causing 'the loss of accumulated knowledge and capacity as many trained volunteers and youth professionals had to leave the sector during the pandemic' (European Parliament, 2021).

Challenges faced by youth workers and youth organisations during the first lockdown continued during the second wave and in 2021. The study conducted by the European Parliament in 2021 covers the second wave of the pandemic, after the summer of 2020. Based on interviews with representatives of large youth organisations (AFS, YMCA Europe, Scouts) the study underlined that the national responses to help youth organisations and to support youth work did not improve during the second half of 2020 (European Parliament, 2021). Youth work and youth organisations have not been identified as key providers of services needed by young people and the most vulnerable young people affected by the pandemic. As a result, policy responses have not been adapted to young people's needs (European Youth Forum, 2021).

Two different effects of the pandemic on youth work and youth organisationshave been revealed by existing studies:

- youth workers and organisations lost contact with some of the most vulnerable young people they used to meet. Young people were affected by the limited access to internet, lack of devices or quiet places to use them and connect with other young people, (RAY Network, 2020c; European Youth Forum 2020; NYA, 2020a; CWVYS, 2020).
- some youth organisations (especially, but not only in the UK) reported reaching different young people than they would usually see at their centres and projects (CWVYS, 2020, European Parliament 2021) and many young people started connecting with others online without perceiving or experiencing great barriers. This made the National Youth Agency (NYA) in UK hope that 'positive friendships are fostering more positive outlooks on what the future holds' (NYA 2020a).

Despite the challenges, young people, youth workers and youth organisations contributed to national efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Studies published in 2020 (i.e. OECD, 2020a) and additional activities in 2021 underline how young people, with the guidance of youth workers or youth leaders from youth organisations, have stepped up to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis (OECD, 2020a, ERYCA, 2021). Governments in France, Denmark, Romania, on the other hand, started cooperating more with youth organisations which took initiatives to complement the activities of public bodies, by disseminating information and providing support to the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, including minorities, and migrants. Youth organisations in several countries in Europe (from Scotland to Slovenia) took initiative in 'translating' to young people the new rules during the pandemic (from sanitary and healthcare rules, to the new way of organising schools). The same organisations also ensured that youth voices were heard by government representatives and better taken into account (ERYCA 2021)[1]. A survey in Moldova underlined that active young people continued to participate, and some of them got even more involved in the life of their community. They also took part in actions to raise community awareness by signing petitions, participating in face-to-face (when possible) and online public consultations, and volunteered to help the elderly (UNFPA Moldova). The OECD report from 2020 presents other examples from Italy, The Netherlands, Finland and UK.

Research within the DigiGen project shows that organisations that are robustly organised (usually larger organisations with higher capacity) use specialised online communication tools and have been more active in engaging online with young people. They are also more mindful of internet safety issues (DigiGen, 2021).

Research from the European Youth Forum (2021) shows a lack of involvement of young people and youth organisations in consultation on planning for recovery after the pandemic and the use of funds at national and European level. This affects the inclusion of youth specific measures and (where included) their potential effectiveness.

Numerous organisations and researchers publish recommendations for decision makers, underlining that the pandemic has not only amplified the vulnerability of young people, but has significantly increased their need for supportive services (RAY Network, 2020b).

Youth organisations and youth workers started calling for a stronger social and political recognition of youth work, better professional development of youth workers, better funding programmes and a stronger framework of youth work policy and practice explicitly linking it with other sectors (European Parliament, 2021, European Youth Work Agenda and the Bonn Process, 2020). At European level, the study conducted by the European Parliament in 2021 recommends the reconsideration of financial instruments and funds

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[1]Young Scots implemented a very detailed information campaign with all materials available online at: https://young.scot/campaigns/national/coronavirus.

available to the youth work sector at the national and EU level, highlighting that quality (digital) youth work needs adequate financial and human resources. Persisting challenges related to the recognition of the role of youth work across Europe need to be addressed to provide young people with better support, services and activities in times of crisis. According to the recommendations of the National Youth Agency in UK, 'youth services must be classified as essential services working alongside health and education professionals. Ambiguity on critical worker status for youth workers in national guidance and local interpretation needs to be addressed urgently.' This is based on the capacity of youth workers to reach and support young people with very different needs and to connect them to professionals in the health sector when needed (NYA, 2020b).

2.2.   Main gaps from research on youth work and youth organisations

Many research activities focused on the first lockdown period (March-May 2020) and the short-term impact of COVID-19 pandemic on youth work and youth organisations. After July 2020, most studies valorised the results of the 'first generation' research reports on the impact of lockdown, developing policy briefs and recommendations. Youth organisations started advocating for increased attention, recognition and support from the public and private sectors, while dealing with numerous challenges. In this context, they promoted the positive role of young people supporting government and society efforts to deal with the pandemic. However, very little is known and systematically researched on the long-term impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the changes it generated on youth work and youth organisations. Future research should address what happened in 2020 and continues to happen in 2021 to young people left behind by the forced digitalisation of youth work.

According to research conducted by the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership (2020c), youth work and youth organisations have also been hit by the sudden digitalisation due to the pandemic. Many young people still live in environments that cannot support their access to the digital world (neither in terms of equipment and connectivity nor in terms of competences). This means that youth workers and organisations have 'lost' their target groups of young people or that they are not able to reach them. In this sense, studies still need to address the consequences of digitalisation on youth work and youth organisations. Future research on youth work should explore the outcomes of digital youth work and its challenges and shortcomings.

COVID-19 accelerated digitalisation of youth work, causing challenges for youth workers and youth organisations, because they needed to change and/or adapt their methodologies in a short period of time and with rather limited resources and support. While information on the impact of the process of digitalisation on youth work is increasing, in depth research should reflect on the long-term impact of COVID-19 on youth work, youth organisations and new youth policies.

Research should also inquire into how youth organisations transformed their structure and their work to face the pandemic period and restrictions (not only the lockdown) and which of those changes are maintained over time.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on digitalisation in the youth sector

3.1. Key findings from research on digitalisation in the youth sector

Digitalisation was and is still a fast-evolving phenomenon. COVID-19 has accelerated its speed and has brought about new tendencies when it comes to the use of online platforms and digital tools in the field of youth. During 2020 the studies were mainly focused on how schools, universities and education in general were affected by a forced digitalisation.

Almost a year after the first confinements, the studies now focus on the use of electronic platforms in sectors related to youth. A study conducted by the OECD (2020b) highlighted that certain areas of the economy were able to make this shift into digital economic transactions, especially those that had less dependence on physical proximity. At the same time, the group that has best adapted to this digitalisation were young people. For example, in online shopping, restaurant delivery and money transactions, there was an increase of electronic platform use of about 20% by young people. However, concerns were raised in terms of reliable digital infrastructure between and within countries. This had implications for many development aspects of young people during the pandemic. For example, having a reliable infrastructure is critical to ensuring young people access to online education, teleworking[2], telecommuting[3] and electronic administrative procedures.

A second trend concerns the use of digital technologies to respond to certain challenges, like raising awareness about youth priorities, through community engagement and youth-led activism. The ODI (2021) mentions that young people had been key actors in connecting their communities with national and international institutions through electronic platforms. One of the examples that stands out is how young people in rural and remote areas used electronic platforms to stay connected despite the confinements. Or how social media channels were used to build trust and shift narratives between youth and older generations.

As Lauha y Nõlvak (2019) write, digitalisation itself does not improve the lives of young people, but it helps to create the social, political and economic conditions that can improve equality and empower them, especially, because digital technologies can bring a series of opportunities for young people in the fields of education, health, participation, communication and information, creativity and self-expression (EU-Council of Europe youth

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[2] Teleworking is an inclusive term meaning partially or fully working outside of a central workplace in a remote location (e.g. home, library, café) using information and communications technology (ICT) and either during normal business hours or otherwise (O'Brien and Aliabadi, 2020).

[3] Telecommuting is a subset of teleworking, with the condition that there is a formal arrangement (e.g. policy or contract) between the employee and employer allowing or encouraging remote work at home (O'Brien and Aliabadi, 2020).

partnership, 2020c). Nevertheless, since the beginning of the pandemic, public services have closed or restricted physical access to offices and have adapted their processes to an increasingly online environment (ERYICA 2021). Everything indicates that these transformations will remain, meaning that young people will be connected to the Internet, be competent in its use, and be able to benefit from it. It is essential that governments and educational, community and youth centres address immediately any connectivity, use and exploitation deficit that exists both in structures and competences. Otherwise, young people with fewer opportunities will be completely left out and deprived of information and services, having a greater risk of social exclusion (Esteban-Navarro et al, 2020).

Many concerns arose regarding persisting inequality among young people in the access, awareness and skills-building opportunities through digital technologies. These limitations restrict their access to devices, data, internet exposure, basic digital skills and the use of platforms for any purpose. Although COVID-19 did not create these digital gaps, it shed a brighter light on them. Those individuals who did not have online access before the pandemic, or they did not have enough digital competences, were left behind. Therefore, there is a need to create better and more equal ways of increasing the number of young people who benefit from technological development. The ODI study highlights that there are no concrete and ambitious policies by governments and authorities to integrate these young people into the digital world. At the same time, ILO (2021) also underlined that there are still regulatory gaps with regard to digital platform governance.

3.2.   Main gaps from research on digitalisation in the youth sector

Issues relating to digitalisation have been acknowledged by many actors and studies showing how those fields may impact young people's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are still gaps on several topics, including accessibility of digital technologies for young people with disabilities. This group is one of the most forgotten, both in studies and by governments. More perspectives from young people with disabilities should be integrated in future studies to gain a better picture of their experience during the pandemic as users, citizens, consumers, and individuals in digital technologies.

On the other hand, one year after the start of the pandemic, the role played by artificial intelligence (AI) with respect to policies and sectors involving young people remain practically unaddressed by current analyses. For example, although the Spanish Youth Report (INJUVE, 2021) broadly addresses all areas related to youth, there is still a considerable deficit in relation to AI. Although information is provided on the hours that young people spend on the internet and to what activities they dedicate these hours, the subject of AI goes unnoticed despite the importance it has today.

Although there has been a considerable increase in studies on AI (in general), research that addresses AI in the field of youth (in particular) is largely absent. There is a gap in research into digitalisation and AI and young people across Europe countries and this gap increases

when it comes to young people's lived realities, aspirations and youth sector in European countries outside the EU.

4. Conclusion

Research conducted in 2020 showed that COVID-19 determined an accelerated digitalisation of youth work. This is one of the main conclusions of reports on the overall impact of the pandemic on young people, but also reports with a special focus on youth organisations and youth work. Moreover, digitalisation itself became a more salient topic for research and position papers in the youth sector.

Digitalisation generated challenges for youth workers and youth organisations, because they needed to change and/or adapt their methodologies in a short period of time and with limited resources and support, especially during the lockdown periods.

On the other hand, in many countries in Europe, youth organisations and youth workers have ensured access to valid, verified, and meaningful information for young people. Youth workers and youth organisations also mobilised resources and empowered young people to volunteer and to participate in the responses to the pandemic.

Research on the pandemic impact on youth work, youth organisations and the digitalisation of services for young people revealed increasing inequalities and the risk of marginalisation for young people with limited access to technology. Youth policy should be particularly aiming at decreasing inequalities in access to resources among young people from different socioeconomic groups and between different regions.

Unsurprisingly, one of the most significant short-to-medium term policy implications for future youth policy and practice resulting from the lockdown are seen as guaranteeing sustainable funding and financial support for the sector and better access to digitalisation through enhanced digital skills and improved access to technical equipment. The pandemic showed that further promotion of equal opportunities for all young people are essential to bridge the digital gap, and therefore must be a mid- and long-term priority for youth policy.

It is also essential that youth research continues to delve into the changes that this forced digitalisation is causing. First, research should support evidence for public authorities and youth organisations to ensure that no young person is left behind by digital barriers. Second, research should identify the obstacles experienced by young people in online formal and non-formal learning and in other youth activities, in order to find appropriate ways to promote the learning process, as well as the continuation of youth work and its benefit for young people. Third, both formal and non-formal learning and other youth activities should integrate the development of digital skills required today both for active citizenship and the labour market.Fourth, access to youth services should be redesigned and

adapted to the needs of youth organisations and young people, especially to their geographical location, internet connectivity and digital competences.

Although The European Commission and the EU Member States have launched recovery funds and started to implement several initiatives to alleviate the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no significant measures proposed in 2020 and the first half of 2021 in order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on services in the youth sector (youth work, volunteering etc.). No information is available on such initiatives in countries of Southeast and Eastern Europe and Caucasus.

Besides, there is little information available on the results of this process of digitalisation of youth work and an important conclusion of this review is the need for in depth research on the long term impact of COVID-19 on youth work, youth organisations and the need for new youth policies.

Research questions that still need answering include:

- What happened in 2020 and continues to happen in 2021 to young people left behind by the pandemic measures and fast-paced digitalisation?
- What are the outcomes of digital youth work? And what are the bottlenecks and shortcomings of digital youth work?
- How did youth organisations transform their structure and their work to face the COVID-19 pandemic period and related restrictions (not only the lockdown)?

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