

A YES Forum message to the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council of the European Union, the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture, and Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, as well as to the chairs and vice-chairs of the European Parliament Committees for Culture and Education, and Employment and Social Affairs.

The crisis affecting the most vulnerable

It is in the nature of a crisis that it mainly affects the most vulnerable in society. And with the low social mobility we have today, placing oneself among the vulnerable is a poor choice. We see young people growing up without a job, without education and without even knowing someone who has. Also, the independence of the individual from the family unit, that should be an integral part of coming of age, is being postponed. Under these circumstances, feelings of hopelessness and exclusion are natural. Instead of participating in society to change structures, many search for scapegoats, often migrants and minorities. Young people without hopes for the future are easy prey for populists and we may see the results of this in the next elections to the European Parliament.

European leaders have shown that they take the situation for young people seriously and the YES Forum welcomes initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment initiative. However, without youth and social work organisations (YSWOs) to help implement the goals set, the initiatives are useless.

An insolvable equation for European YSWOs

But just like young people themselves, YSWOs are also victims of the financial crisis and the measures having been taken so far to fight it. All around Europe, they are being squeezed between two problems: more workload and reduced, more uncertain funding. If YSWOs are to take on the role of giving young people their future back, they have to be given an equation they can solve. This equation, however, is insolvable as it currently stands.

Budget cuts have struck hard against YSWOs and many organisations have lost big parts of their funding at national, regional and local levels. And the funds that still exist are often given out on project basis. This makes work more uncertain, because staff costs have to be covered through timebound and restricted project funding instead of long-term grants. Also, this short-sightedness leaves no room for creativity and innovation. An organisation worrying about its future does not dare to experiment or take on unpopular causes, and does not have the flexibility to quickly react to emerging needs or trends. No experiments equals no new solutions. The problem is thus very easy to describe: you cannot do *more* work with *less* money! And the uncertainty that has now become normal for YSWOs affect above all those that already suffer the most – vulnerable young people.

More administration and search for money equals less time with young people

Still, YSWOs are fighting to survive and to give hope to young people. They simply spend more time and resources hunting for money. They work harder on public relations, trying to make themselves attractive to donors, rather than to the young people they should be working for.

Also, YSWOs now have to work harder with administration. If they want to keep any public funding, they have to abide by the reigning culture of standardised evaluation, reporting and statistics that might work well for companies, but can be problematic for youth work.

Spending more time working with administration and searching for money means less time doing what youth and social workers are good at – working with young people! The problems of YSWOs are the problems of young people and their problems are those of our society!

Therefore, the YES Forum suggests the following ways to promote YSWOs:

- **Acknowledgement.** The work of YSWOs needs to be more acknowledged. They see on the ground what decision-makers only see in graphs and they know what is to be done. But they need more support. Decision-makers need to be able to look beyond the figures and recognise for example the importance of the informal and non-formal learning most YSWOs work with. Outcomes can be measured in different ways and this is hard to capture with standardised follow-up reports.
- **Inclusion.** YSWOs are affected by legislation in ways decision-makers are not always aware of. Mobility restrictions, hygiene regulations, accounting, etc. – everything influences the daily work. Therefore, YSWOs, professionals and young people should be consulted more in the legislation process.
- **Stability.** Funding stability is essential for YSWOs to be able to think sustainably and creatively. Therefore operational support for an effective infrastructure in the youth field is important for YSWOs to have qualified and passionate staff and to offer professional youth work. Also, project administration must be reasonable in relation to the amount of money received. Hence for projects with smaller financial volume, flat-rate grants are more appropriate.

Good for YSWOs – good for society

YSWOs can give young people a sense of belonging and participation. There are lots of success stories of organisations having accompanied young people all the way to employment – some have even themselves created positions for them. The YSWOs should be supported to try out different models that social businesses then can take over.

On the other hand, we cannot let “employability” be the one value that overshadows all others. The key issue is young people’s successful transition to adulthood. Active citizenship and participation are also important and here, YSWOs play a crucial role. In particular, youth work with a European perspective can help fight hopelessness and populism – it can connect young people all across Europe, especially those who otherwise would not have had the possibility or motivation to meet other cultures. Understanding across borders also develops understanding within the borders.

YSWOs play a vital role in helping Europe out of the crisis. They have valuable knowledge and expertise. Most often, they last longer than national governments and they are therefore in a position to think sustainably and with a long-term perspective. In its conclusions from 17-18 May 2013, the Council of the European Union stressed the contribution of quality youth work to the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people.¹ The awareness seems to be there – now the YES Forum wants to see some action!

Our members, professionals and the young people themselves are the experts and would be happy to enter into dialogue with policy makers with regard to finding new and innovative ways to work with and for young people.

¹ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/137148.pdf