

Research-based
analysis of European
youth programmes



3rd European
Youth Work
Convention

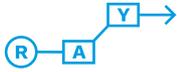


European
Youth Work
Agenda

LEARNING FROM THE IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ON YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE

**RESOURCE PAPER FOR THE
3RD EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK CONVENTION**

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
1. CONTEXT	5
2. RATTLED TO THE CORE.....	5
2.1. WIDE AND DEEP EFFECTS ON ALL ASPECTS OF YOUTH WORK.....	6
2.2. WIDESPREAD DELAYS AND LOOMING CANCELLATIONS	6
2.3. CHIPPING AWAY AT THE FOUNDATIONS.....	7
2.4. THE FRAGILITY OF INTERNATIONAL YOUTH WORK.....	8
2.5. A SHOCKWAVE FOR YOUTH WORK	9
3. RESISTANT AT THE CORE	11
3.1. EXPERIMENTING AMIDST UNCERTAINTY	11
3.2. DEVELOPING AN ONLINE VOICE.....	11
3.3. AGAINST ALL ODDS.....	12
4. EXPOSED TO THE CORE	13
4.1. STRUGGLING WITH AN EVASIVE PURPOSE.....	13
4.2. TIME TO CHANGE THE ODDS	14



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world is going through unprecedented times: the coronavirus pandemic has taken people, governments, and societies initially by surprise – and youth work was no exception. The resource paper on this topic illustrates the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on youth work in Europe, explores what can be learnt from the effects of the pandemic and the responses of youth work to its effects, and outlines needs and suggest options to support youth work during and after the pandemic.

The research of the RAY Network shows, very much in alignment with other research being conducted across Europe, that youth work has been shaken to its core by the coronavirus pandemic: the very tangible effects on staff and volunteers as well as funding and structures severely limit youth work practice during these turbulent times.

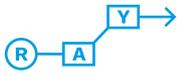
The profound effects of the pandemic have touched every aspect of youth work: activity and event formats, methods and tools, places and spaces, times and timings – and, to a lesser extent, values and principles. Across Europe, many youth work activities and projects were delayed and/or interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. More than half of all youth work activities remain in limbo – and the risk assessment for full activity and project cancellations remains high.

Work time of paid staff members has frequently decreased, and less commonly also their number. Volunteering time, and the total number of active volunteers, have shrunk more considerably, a development that is particularly worrying. The coronavirus pandemic has also triggered stark effects on the budgets of many youth work organisations in a very short amount of time. At the same time, the eligibility of youth work organisations to pandemic relief packages remains very low across Europe.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic is more severe for international youth work, where structural funding is much less common and project-based funding prevails. International youth work has been delayed or interrupted significantly more often, budget reductions have been significantly more prevalent, and reductions of work time and numbers of staff as well as engagement time and numbers of volunteers have so far been significantly higher in international youth work.

The impact outlined in the resource paper is nothing other than a shockwave for youth work, laying bare the fragility of youth work in general, and the amplified frailty of international youth work in particular. All this should be reason for stark concern, especially when considered together with the sustained risk of further project and funding cancellations, as lockdowns are being renewed and/or intensified across Europe.

In addition, youth work is struggling with having to take as many of its activities, programmes and projects online as fast as it can. And yet, at times seemingly against all odds, youth work manages to help young people through this pandemic – and young people help youth work through this pandemic, too. From battling misinformation to addressing mental health, from building online spaces to organising device-sharing, there are countless examples from youth work within and beyond Europe that demonstrate how crisis-savvy and resilient youth work



can be, even when budgets need to be cut, staff time has to be reduced, and volunteers must slow down.

The RAY data demonstrates, however, that despite all that resilience youth work is trying to find its bearings in largely uncharted waters at maximum speed. If youth work's function is to build bridges that support positive transitions, what does youth work do when these transitions grind to a screeching halt amidst a global pandemic? If youth work's role is to build bridges that support the integration in particular of young people at risk of social exclusion, what does youth work do when exactly these young people fall out of reach?

The resource paper illustrates that the coronavirus pandemic has not only led to a substantive crisis of youth work in its own right, but that it has also exposed the systemic fragilities of youth work across Europe. With very few exceptions, youth work will not be able to recover from this dual crisis without purposeful, dedicated and generous support, and a substantive strengthening of the infrastructure and conditions for digitalisation within youth work.

It is to be hoped that the European Youth Work Agenda clears the path for some, if not all, of the necessary structural changes, so that youth work can focus on what it does best: create spaces and build bridges with and for young people – with confidence in their political backing, and without fear of the survival of their organisation.



1. CONTEXT

The world is going through unprecedented times: the coronavirus pandemic has taken people, governments, and societies initially by surprise – and youth work was no exception¹. This short paper seeks to illustrate the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on youth work in Europe, to explore what can be learnt from the effects of the pandemic and the responses of youth work to its effects, and to outline needs and suggest options to support youth work during and after the pandemic. It is based on the findings of the ongoing thematic research project of the [RAY Network](#), the self-governed European network for the research-based analysis of the European youth programmes. As part of the RAY CORONA research project, a literature review has been conducted, complementing and to large extents confirming and underpinning the RAY findings.

2. RATTLED TO THE CORE

Youth work has been shaken to its core by the coronavirus pandemic: the very tangible effects on staff and volunteers as well as funding and structures severely limit youth work practice during these turbulent times. They have also exposed a number of fundamental fragilities of youth work.

In June 2020, at a time when most European states had begun to ease the restrictions of the first wave of lockdowns, 70% of youth workers and youth leaders responding to our initial survey² said that the coronavirus pandemic had affected their own youth work majorly. In November 2020, at a time when most European states had entered the second wave of lockdowns, that assessment remains largely unchanged, as our second survey³ shows:

Q » Has the coronavirus pandemic affected your own youth work?		
<i>Response options</i>	<i>June 2020</i>	<i>November 2020</i>
It has had no affect at all	0,9%	1,0%
It has had slight effects	5,6%	5,2%
It has had moderate effects	23,4%	24,5%
It has had major effects	70,1%	69,2%
Total	100,0%	100,0%

¹ While a side-note for this specific resource paper, it shall nonetheless be acknowledged that the risks for global pandemics and their likely causes have been well documented for some time. It is the specificity of SARS-CoV-2 that has taken people, governments, and societies initially by surprise.

² Our initial online survey (English only) on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on youth work in Europe and youth work's response to the effects of the pandemic ran between May 2020 and July 2020, with the majority of responses being submitted throughout June 2020. N=560.

³ Our second online survey (in 25 languages) on what and how youth work is doing during the pandemic went online in mid-October 2020 and will run at least through to the end of 2020. N=448 at the time of finalising this paper on 22 November 2020.

2.1. WIDE AND DEEP EFFECTS ON ALL ASPECTS OF YOUTH WORK

The profound effects of the pandemic have touched every aspect of youth work: activity and event formats, methods and tools, places and spaces, times and timings – and, to a lesser extent, values and principles. Some of these effects have intensified, others have lessened over summer, when it was partly possible to re-open youth work’s physical spaces, but are likely to re-intensify during the winter months ahead:

Q » Which aspects of your youth work have been affected?				
	<i>June 2020</i>		<i>November 2020</i>	
	<i>Moderately</i>	<i>Majorly</i>	<i>Moderately</i>	<i>Majorly</i>
<i>Activities and events</i>	35,0%	51,8%	24,4%	69,2%
<i>Places and spaces</i>	19,5%	69,1%	27,1%	49,5%
<i>Times and timing</i>	32,9%	46,9%	30,6%	30,9%
<i>Methods and tools</i>	37,6%	46,0%	36,1%	43,7%
<i>Principles and values</i>	12,9%	10,7%	18,4%	11,6%

2.2. WIDESPREAD DELAYS AND LOOMING CANCELLATIONS

Across Europe, many youth work activities and projects were delayed and/or interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. Over the summer, it has been possible to catch up on some of these delays and interruptions, but more than half of all youth work activities remain in limbo:

Q » How much of your youth work has been delayed or interrupted?		
<i>Response options</i>	<i>Jun 2020</i>	<i>Nov 2020</i>
All youth work was delayed or interrupted	8,7%	4,5%
Two thirds or more of youth work was delayed or interrupted	46,1%	39,7%
Between one and two thirds of youth work was delayed or interrupted	32,4%	33,1%
Less than one third of youth work was delayed or interrupted	11,1%	21,9%
No youth work was delayed or interrupted	1,7%	0,8%
Median⁴	70,0%	60,0%

⁴ The median value shows for how many of the survey respondents more than 50% of their youth work was delayed or interrupted. In June 2020, 70% of all respondents estimated that at least half of their youth work activities and projects were delayed and/or interrupted; in November 2020, 60% of all respondents made that estimate.



While it looks like youth work has been able to regain some time, the risk assessment for full activity and project cancellations remains as high as it was in June, as the table below shows:

Q » How much of your youth work has been or is at risk of being cancelled entirely?		
<i>Response options</i>	<i>Jun 2020</i>	<i>Nov 2020</i>
All youth work was or is at risk to be cancelled	7,6%	5,8%
Two thirds or more of youth work was or is at risk to be cancelled	23,0%	25,5%
Between one and two thirds of youth work was/is at risk to be cancelled	26,2%	25,9%
Less than one third of youth work was or is at risk to be cancelled	36,2%	38,7%
No youth work was or is at risk to be cancelled	7,0%	4,1%
Median	40,0%	40,0%

2.3. CHIPPING AWAY AT THE FOUNDATIONS

Work time of paid staff members has frequently decreased (38% in June, 29% in November) and less commonly also their number, though with an upward tendency (15% in June, 25% in November). Volunteering time and the total number of active volunteers have shrunk more considerably, a development that is particularly worrying since youth work across Europe is supported tremendously and indeed often carried by volunteers:

Q » How have staff and volunteers been impacted so far by the crisis?		
<i>Response options</i>	<i>Jun 2020</i>	<i>Nov 2020</i>
Work time of our paid staff in our team has decreased	37,5%	28,5%
The number of paid staff in our team has decreased	15,3%	24,7%
Engagement time of our volunteers has decreased	65,1%	53,4%
The number of volunteers in our team has decreased	26,2%	48,2%

The coronavirus pandemic has also triggered stark effects on the budgets of many youth work organisations across Europe in a very short amount of time: In June 2020, 49% of the responding youth workers and youth leaders said the budget of their organisation had decreased. And while in November 2020 that percentage went down to 39%, the average budget decrease grew, a disquieting display of the fragility of youth work structures - as you can see in the table on the next page:

Q » How much, in your estimate in percent, has your youth work budget decreased?

<i>Response options</i>	<i>Jun 2020</i>	<i>Nov 2020</i>
Our budget has decreased by 100%	3,3%	6,0%
Our budget has decreased by two thirds or more	17,9%	17,9%
Our budget has decreased between one and two thirds	30,9%	47,8%
Our budget has decreased by up to one third	48,0%	28,4%
<i>Median</i>	<i>40,0%</i>	<i>40,0%</i>

At the same time, the eligibility of youth work organisations to pandemic relief packages remains very low across Europe: 19% of the responding organisations had successfully applied for COVID-19-related financial support in November 2020.

2.4. THE FRAGILITY OF INTERNATIONAL YOUTH WORK

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic is – statistically and substantively – more severe for international youth work, a domain where structural funding is much less common and project-based funding prevails. In our November 2020 survey, 41% of the responding youth workers and youth leaders said they were involved in international youth work, whereas 33% said to be involved in local youth work, allowing us to explore and contextualise the impact at different spatial levels of youth work.

At the time of finalising this resource paper on 22 November 2020, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic were major for 57% of respondents involved in local youth work (LYW), compared to 72% of respondents involved in international youth work (IYW).

Q » Has the coronavirus pandemic affected your own youth work?

<i>Response options</i>	<i>LYW</i>	<i>IYW</i>
It has had no affect at all	2,2%	0,0%
It has had slight effects	8,6%	4,3%
It has had moderate effects	32,3%	23,3%
It has had major effects	57,0%	72,4%
Total	100,0%	100,0%

International youth work has been delayed or interrupted significantly more often – the median, showing for how many of the survey respondents more than 50% of their youth work was delayed or interrupted, is 50% for local youth work and 65% for international youth work – as the table on the next page shows:


Q » How much of your youth work has been delayed or interrupted?

<i>Response options</i>	<i>LYW</i>	<i>IYW</i>
All youth work was delayed or interrupted	3,9%	8,2%
Two thirds or more of youth work was delayed or interrupted	31,2%	41,8%
Between one and two thirds of youth work was delayed or interrupted	28,6%	31,6%
Less than one third of youth work was delayed or interrupted	36,4%	18,3%
No youth work was delayed or interrupted	0,0%	0,0%
Median	50,0%	65,0%

Reductions of work time and numbers of staff as well as engagement time and numbers of volunteers, have so far been significantly higher in international youth work:

Q » How have staff and volunteers been impacted so far by the crisis?

<i>Response options</i>	<i>LYW</i>	<i>IYW</i>
Work time of our paid staff in our team has decreased	15,5%	40,0%
The number of paid staff in our team has decreased	14,0%	35,0%
Engagement time of our volunteers has decreased	39,3%	62,0%
The number of volunteers in our team has decreased	35,7%	60,8%

And finally, budget reductions have so far also been significantly more prevalent in international youth work:

Q » Overall, including any Corona-related financial support, how has your youth work budget been impacted so far?

<i>Response options</i>	<i>Local youth work</i>	<i>International youth work</i>
Our budget has remained the same	70,2%	44,9%
Our budget has decreased	21,1%	51,9%
Our budget has increased	8,8%	3,7%
Total	100,0%	100,0%



2.5. A SHOCKWAVE FOR YOUTH WORK

The impact outlined in this chapter is nothing other than a shockwave for youth work, a wave that is much more rapid and profound for international youth work⁵. While it is logical that through international travel restrictions there is a heightened effect on international youth work activities, the instant and blatant impact at systemic level – on budgets, staff, and volunteers – lays bare the frailty of international youth work. All this should be reason for stark concern, especially when considered together with the sustained risk of further project and funding cancellations, as lockdowns are being renewed and/or intensified across Europe.

⁵ Effects also show statistically significant differences for the impact on local youth work, specifically between countries where youth work is well established and steadily financed and countries where that is not yet the case. But even taken these differences into consideration, the effects on international youth work are much harsher.



3. RESISTANT AT THE CORE

3.1. EXPERIMENTING AMIDST UNCERTAINTY

Despite the principal delays and interruptions, youth workers and youth leaders and their organisations and networks are trying to rise to the challenge of experimenting with new tools, formats, spaces, and methods. In the eyes of young people involved in youth work, whom we also surveyed in June and November 2020, those experiments are, overall, appreciated – though with a tangible effect of the ongoing uncertainty the sector is faced with as well as clear room for improvement:

Q » In your opinion and context, how well has youth work responded to the crisis?		
<i>Response options</i>	<i>Jun 2020</i>	<i>Nov 2020</i>
The response of youth work was very adequate	29,0%	20,8%
The response of youth work was somewhat adequate	40,2%	41,7%
The response of youth work was somewhat inadequate	21,5%	20,8%
The response of youth work was very inadequate	9,3%	16,7%

3.2. DEVELOPING AN ONLINE VOICE

The struggle with spaces of youth work is one of the trilemmas identified by Howard Williamson and Filip Coussée at the culmination of the decade-long 'History of youth work' project under the auspices of the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth. These trilemmas represent triangles of reflections but also of tensions.

One of the reflective trilemmas is called 'Space: where does youth work happen?' and has as its three corners three distinct spaces where youth work happens: buildings, street, digital.⁶

The deep look into the role of youth work in an increasingly digitalised world that Howard Williamson and Filip Coussée called for in their 2019 publication has now been forcefully fast-tracked by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. But as the analysis of Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll et al. from the German Youth Institute shows, youth work needs to play catch-up under unfavourable circumstances. In their document analysis they demonstrate that digital youth work has seen sporadic political attention, but that these policy discourses and the resulting declarations at policy level have not yet been translated into the professional documents framing youth work practice.⁷

⁶ Williamson, H. & Coussée, F. (2019). 'Reflective Dialogue: Conclusions from the History Project – Twelve trilemmas for youth work'. In: H. Williamson and T. Basarab (eds). *The history of youth work in Europe Volume VII*. Strasbourg, Council of Europe, p. 199 f.

⁷ Hofmann-van de Poll, F., Pelzer, M., Riedle, S. & Rottach, A. (2020). *The European Discussion on Youth Work 2015-2020*. Munich, German Youth Institute, p. 19 ff.

Against that backdrop, it is not all too surprising to see youth work struggle with having to take as much of its activities, programmes and projects online as fast as it can. In November 2020, 58% of the youth workers and youth leaders responding to our survey said that they had managed to take less than one third of their youth work online since the pandemic began.

Youth work needs rapid and sweeping support to resolve administrative, financial, legal, and technical issues, so that youth workers and youth leaders can concentrate on the pedagogical and philosophical aspects of digitalised youth work and youth work in a digitalised world and begin to develop what Lasse Siurala calls *practice-based critical digital literacy*⁸.

3.3. AGAINST ALL ODDS

Yet, at times seemingly against all odds, youth work manages to help young people through this pandemic – and young people help youth work through this pandemic, too.

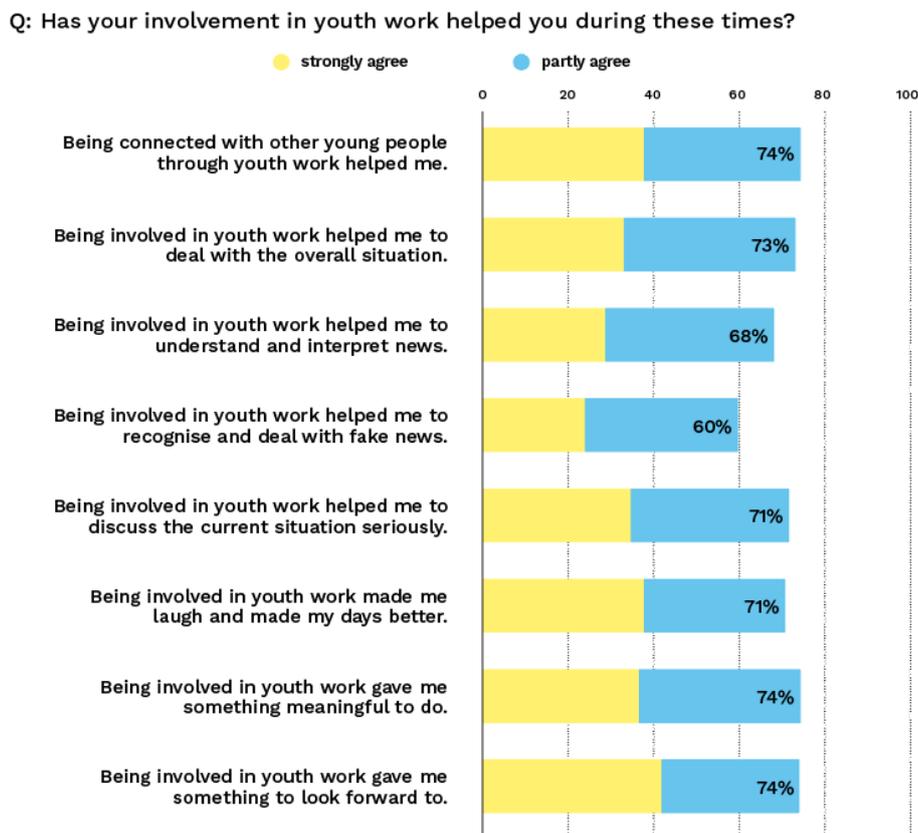


Figure 1: Responses by young people involved in youth work (June 2020)

From battling misinformation to addressing mental health, from building online spaces to organising device-sharing, there are countless examples from youth work within and beyond Europe that demonstrate how crisis-savvy and resilient youth work can be, even when budgets need to be cut, staff time has to be reduced, and volunteers must slow down.

⁸ Siurala, L. (2020). *Youth work and techlash. What are the new challenges of digitalisation for young people?* Strasbourg, Youth Partnership, p. 25 f.



4. EXPOSED TO THE CORE

4.1. STRUGGLING WITH AN EVASIVE PURPOSE

The final declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention captured the twofold common ground of youth work as follows:

'First, it is concerned with creating spaces for young people. Second, it provides bridges in their lives. [...] Beyond creating autonomous spaces for youth work practice, youth work is also concerned with enabling young people to create their own spaces and opening spaces that are missing [...]. Similarly, youth work plays a bridging role in supporting young people's social integration, especially young people at risk of social exclusion.'

2nd European Youth Work Convention, 2015

The RAY survey data demonstrates that an already ongoing tectonic shift of youth work spaces has been further accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, forcing youth work to find its bearings in largely uncharted waters at maximum speed. That search for new ways and forms of creating autonomous spaces is, however, not the only challenge youth work is facing.

The second half of the dual common ground is equally challenged and challenging. If youth work's function is to build bridges that support positive transitions, what does youth work do when these transitions grind to a screeching halt amidst a global pandemic? Transitions of young people are turning into waiting loops, at best, and breaking points, at worst – and youth work needs to experiment, adapt and evolve.

Equally, if youth work's role is to build bridges that support the integration in particular of young people at risk of social exclusion, what does youth work do when exactly these young people fall out of reach? Lack of access to their own device, lack of reliable internet access, and lack to an environment of privacy and protection to use their device: all these are problems to solve, oftentimes in combination.

Q » How many of the young people you normally work with, in your estimate in percent, do you currently still reach with your youth work?

<i>Response options</i>	<i>Jun 2020</i>	<i>Nov 2020</i>
All young people still in reach	8,6%	6,4%
Two thirds or more of young people still in reach	22,3%	36,0%
Between one and two thirds of young people still in reach	32,1%	27,1%
Less than one third of young people still in reach	33,9%	26,6%
None of previously reached young people still in reach	3,1%	3,9%
<i>Median</i>	<i>50,0%</i>	<i>50,0%</i>



Youth work is by far not the only field that is losing access to young people during the pandemic, but its example draws attention to the persistence of digital gaps and digital divides – a well-researched challenge⁹ for which policy needs to find a suitable response¹⁰.

4.2. TIME TO CHANGE THE ODDS

Imagine for a moment how much stronger youth work could be, in this moment of crisis, alone with access to COVID-19-relief programmes and mobile internet devices they could share with young people in need. And imagine for another moment how much stronger youth work could be, beyond this moment of crisis, with sweeping digitalisation support and a solid strategy on how to bring youth work closer to other professions working with young people – again just two examples of many more policy options to strengthen youth work at its core.

But, as this paper illustrates, the coronavirus pandemic has not only led to a substantive crisis of youth work in its own right, it has also exposed the systemic fragilities of youth work across Europe. With very few exceptions, youth work will not be able to recover from this dual crisis without purposeful, dedicated and generous support. Young people will not be able to swiftly return to volunteering, because it will take time and effort to recover from holdbacks and disruptions of their personal transitions. Organisations and networks will not be able to quickly re-start projects or re-hire staff, because it will take time and effort to gain control of their budgets and make up for their financial losses, at least partially. International youth work will not be able to return to pre-pandemic activity levels, because it will be all but impossible to replace the losses of funding, staff and volunteers.

And alongside all the needed recovery work, youth policy needs to substantially strengthen the infrastructure and conditions for digitalisation within youth work – and youth work practice needs to finally start taking digitalisation seriously. Digital youth work can no longer be refined to a few nerdy makers spaces or a handful of virtual youth exchanges: it has been the neglected corner of the 'space trilemma' for too long.

It is to be hoped that the European Youth Work Agenda clears the path for some, if not all, of the necessary structural changes, so that youth work can focus on what it does best: create spaces and build bridges with and for young people – with confidence in their political backing, and without fear of the survival of their organisation.

⁹ Helsper, E. & Smirnova, S. (2016). *Slipping through the net. Are disadvantaged young people being left further behind in the digital era?* London, The Prince's Trust, p. 8 ff.

¹⁰ Allam, M., Ader, M. & Igrioglu, G. (2020). *Youth and Covid-19. Response, recovery and resilience*. Paris, OECD, p. 4 f.