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Briefing note - theme 5

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European Youth Work Convention 2015 - Background paper for Theme 5: *How can youth work secure recognition (beyond the youth field) for both its distinctive and collaborative practice and contribution to the lives of young people and the communities in which they live?*

How can youth work secure recognition?

The first attempt for the articulation of a comprehensive strategy for the promotion of the recognition of youth work has been made in 2004 when the partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission published the joint working paper *Pathways towards validation and recognition of education, training & learning in the youth field* (Council of Europe and European Commission Partnership, 2004). Since then, there have been important policy developments, in both the education sector and the youth field, putting recognition of youth work on the European political agenda. During the same period a variety of instruments and other relevant tools have been developed, including the *European Portfolio for Youth Leaders and Youth Workers* (2006), an initiative of the Council of Europe for the recognition of youth leaders and youth workers' experience and skills based on European quality standards; and the *Youthpass* (2007), a tool of the European Commission for the validation and recognition of non-formal education/learning in the youth field within the framework of the Youth in Action Programme (SALTO-Youth, 2012: 37, 39).

A revised strategy (and a detailed Plan of Action) for the promotion of political and societal recognition of youth work has been proposed in 2011 by the EU-CoE partnership in their new joint publication *Pathways 2.0 towards recognition of non-formal learning/education and of youth work in Europe* (European Commission and the Council of Europe Partnership, 2011). In short, the *Pathways Paper* encourages the consolidation of existing developments and it proposes ten recommendations for action, including: reinforcement of political processes on the European level by a joint strategy called 'the Strasbourg process'; greater visibility of youth work and youth organizations; quality assurance and professional support to those working in the youth field (e.g. high quality training and educational programmes); building knowledge about the non-formal learning/education in youth work; further development and better transferability of the existing tools and instruments; involvement of stakeholders from the political and social sectors but, most importantly, from the labour market (e.g. establishment of strategic partnerships); linking youth to the lifelong learning strategy (European Commission and the Council of Europe Partnership, 2013).

Although all the proposed areas of action are necessary in order to foster the recognition of youth work, it seems that the most crucial step towards this direction is to communicate more effectively the added value of youth work activities for young people, the economy and the wider society. As the European Youth Forum has concluded, '[t]he emphasis on the impact of youth work on the individual and societal levels should be strengthened' and 'the debate should not only focus on

demanding recognition but also *providing* worth' (European Youth Forum, 2014: 7). Similarly the Pathways Paper stressed that '[t]o increase trust and credibility the youth field should strongly highlight the positive outcome and impact of relevant activities both at the level of individual young people and for society itself' (European Commission and Council of Europe Partnership, 2013: 31).

But in order to inform society about the role of youth work and the contributions of non-formal learning in the youth field, we should first define (and decide between us) which are the strongest assets of youth work. Put differently, we should be able to answer, in a convincing way the following question: *why does youth work deserve recognition?*

So, why recognition?

A substantial body of international research has confirmed the various benefits of youth work for the young people themselves but also for the broader societies (Dunne et al, 2014: 137). First of all, youth work facilitates the smooth transition of young people from childhood to adulthood since youth organisations provide young people the space for building interactions, 'room for role experimentation, the opportunity to play (continuing childhood needs) and to make relationships' (Eisenstadt, 1963). Thus, the most important contribution of youth work is related to its educational dimension, that is, the learning that takes place in youth work practice, which usually has the form of 'non-formal learning' since it happens outside a formal institutional context (schools, universities, training sites) (SALTO-Youth, 2012: 14). Youth work by engaging young people in a wide range of activities in non-formal settings (associations, clubs, voluntary activities, international exchange programmes), enables them to build up 'soft skills'– such as personality characteristics (e.g. self-confidence, responsibility, discipline etc.), interpersonal skills, language abilities, leadership skills, team-work spirit, problem-solving, organisational/planning skills, etc. – which are extremely valuable for their general personal development and their social interaction (European Youth Forum, 2003: 4; SALTO-Youth, 2012: 20).

Among the most significant contributions of youth work, which should become more visible to society in order to promote societal recognition, one could distinguish the following (the list is indicative only):

- *Youth work improves young people's employability* given that certain skills and attitudes that young people acquire in non-formal environments tend to play an increasingly important role on the labour market. Indeed, these more practical 'soft skills' – which cannot easily be learned in formal education – seem to be as important as 'hard skills' (formal qualifications) (European Youth Forum, 2003: 7). According to a recent study, youth work contributes to the employability of young people by: 'Developing skills that are demanded on the labour market; Developing specific skills as well as behaviours that are required to secure a job; Gaining an experience in practical application of one's skills and competences in a real environment; Supporting orientation as well as job searching and matching' (Dunne at al, 2014: 146).
- *Youth work can contribute to education and training, supporting and empowering disadvantaged groups.* Due to the fact that learning in the non-formal environments of youth work is more attractive to young people – because participation in youth activities is

voluntary and learning more enjoyable – youth organizations are able to reach out much more young people than the institutions of formal education, and from a wide range of social-economic backgrounds. This is very important, because youth work can provide young people – especially those who did not find their luck in the formal education system, who are usually young people with fewer opportunities – an alternative learning pathway. According to the *T-Kit on Social Inclusion*, 'young people who have left school early or who are in precarious situations in society could benefit from non-formal education as a second chance that could have a strong impact in their lives' (Council of Europe and European Commission Partnership, 2003: 39). In addition, some studies have suggested that youth work by improving non-cognitive skills can help disadvantaged young people to improve their later academic outcomes, while youth work activities – due to their positive and supporting environment – can play a significant role in the prevention of early school leaving (Dunne et al, 2014: 143-144). Taking into account that in 2014, 7.5 million young Europeans between 15 and 24 were not in employment, education and training (European Commission, 2014:1), as well as the risks that this exposes the young persons to – including disaffection, youth-offending, mental and physical health problems, and poor future employment prospects (Eurofound, 2012: 2) – it becomes obvious that youth work can be an invaluable tool for dealing with this difficult situation.

- *Youth work can foster civic participation and democratic citizenship, essential to the development of society.* Young people through their participation in youth organisations, clubs and associations learn key aspects of democratic participation. As stressed by the European Youth Forum, '[y]outh organizations' engagement provides individuals and groups with a necessary set of skills and attitudes, leading to a healthier democracy and more peaceful society' (European Youth Forum, 2014: 6). Furthermore, due to the international dimension of some youth work activities (such as, international volunteering, international youth exchange and mobility programmes, etc.), youth work can provide young persons with the opportunity to develop a range of important intercultural skills and attitudes (including intercultural awareness, cross-cultural communication, language skills, conflict resolution, etc.) which foster understanding, tolerance and respect, while combats xenophobia, racism and other similar phenomena (e.g. Anti-semitism, Islamophobia). In a period of sharp radicalization of young people, when protest politics gain ground over more traditional forms of political participation among the young, youth work can play a key role in educating young people in positive participation. In other words, by cultivating the democratic ethos in practice, youth work has the potential not only to empower young people to actively participate in social and political life but also to prevent them from involving themselves in negative forms of political participation, such as riots, violent episodes, anti-social and anomic behaviour and other extreme political activities.

Overall, youth work secures the smooth and healthy transition of young people from childhood to adulthood; the crucial point here is that in antithesis to other sectors of policy (e.g. employment) which tend to view this transition as a problematic stage of the life course (that is, as a period of 'storm and stress') and the young people 'as a problem' – or even 'as both "dangerous" and a "threat" – the youth sector sees youth as a potential positive period and the young people 'as in problem' and 'in need of protection' (France, 2007: 23).

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