



**GENERATION  
EUROPE**  
The Academy



# YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE: MISSION (IM)POSSIBLE?

Documentation of the Symposium to Promote Dialogue  
Between Youth, Youth Work and Politics  
13 November 2023 | Dortmund, Germany



**IBB**  
Internationales  
Bildungs- und  
Begegnungswerk

## Youth Work in Europe: Mission (Im)possible?

Documentation of the Symposium to Promote Dialogue  
Between Youth, Youth Work and Politics, 13 November 2023

Published by IBB e.V., Bornstr. 66, 44145 Dortmund, Germany

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Layout & V.i.S.d.P.: Rolf van Raden (address see above)

1st edition March 2024

Printing: Unitedprint, Friedrich-List-Str. 3, 01445 Radebeul

**Generation Europe – The Academy** is a programme by the International Association for Education and Exchange (IBB e.V.), funded by Stiftung Mercator, the European Union, the Ministry for Children, Youth, Family, Equality, Refugees and Integration of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia (MKJFGFI), the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), the Thuringian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (TMBJS) and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports Baden-Württemberg.

STIFTUNG  
MERCATOR

Ministerium für Kinder, Jugend, Familie,  
Gleichstellung, Flucht und Integration  
des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen



Co-funded by  
the European Union

European  
Cultural  
Foundation



Bundesministerium  
für Familie, Senioren, Frauen  
und Jugend

Freistaat  
Thüringen



Ministerium  
für Bildung,  
Jugend und Sport



Baden-Württemberg

MINISTERIUM FÜR KULTUS, JUGEND UND SPORT

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# GENERATION EUROPE

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## OVERVIEW

# INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE IN DORTMUND

Overwork, underfunding, juggling from project proposal to project proposal: the state of youth work has been difficult for years. In times of wars and other crises, young people need more offers and greater support. At the same time, costs are exploding for organisations that provide spaces for young people. What can be done?

During the symposium, young people and youth work professionals met in Dortmund with representatives from politics, administration and academia. Their common goal: putting heads together to develop solutions to the huge problems that youth work is currently facing.

Young people from nine European countries and eleven German municipalities travelled to the big consultation in the “Dortmunder U – Centre for Art and Creativity”, as well as stakeholders and experts from Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania and Spain.

## DEMOCRACY, DIVERSITY AND DEPRESSION

In mixed working groups, the participants dealt with topics such as youth work and mental health – a burning issue, as the number of clinical depression cases among young people has risen by 60 percent in the years of crisis since 2019. They also discussed how working conditions in the field of youth work can be improved, the role youth work plays in maintaining democratic structures in Europe and how diversity and inclusion can be increased in youth projects.

The symposium was organised by the International Association for Education and Exchange (IBB e.V.) in the framework of the European youth network “Generation Europe – The Academy”. The Dortmund-

based non-governmental organisation has been coordinating networks and funding programmes to enable European youth institutions to work together across national borders for 15 years. In addition to international meetings, the strengthening of local youth groups plays a special part in this.

“It is wonderful and outstanding that so many young people took part in the international symposium,” says Elke Wegener, Managing Director of IBB e.V. “Political and academic consultations on youth policy often take place without those who are most confronted with the consequences. That’s why we felt it was particularly important to facilitate dialogue between politicians, experts, academics and administrators and the young people affected.”

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY MAKERS**

To enable a discussion at eye level, IBB organised a preparatory and training day for the young participants beforehand. During the event itself, the young people presented the work of their local groups and international project partnerships, and worked with the stakeholders to develop proposals for improving the situation. First results of the cooperation include the demand for reliable funding for youth work in all European countries, possibly linked to the GDP, the development of a Master’s degree programme for youth work to strengthen the working field, and the establishment and expansion of safe spaces for young people.









## YOUTH DAY

# GETTING READY FOR THE SYMPOSIUM

On 13 November 2023, European youth organisations met with representatives from politics, administration and academia in Dortmund, Germany. Their common goal: to **develop solutions** to the huge problems international youth work is currently facing. Young people from nine European countries have already travelled to Dortmund one day earlier to prepare for the international symposium during “Youth Day”.

The youngsters wanted to present the projects they are involved in at home and within their international partnerships. They also wanted to **discuss with those who set the frame for youth work** how these efforts can be supported and safeguarded, even in times of multiple crises. So to speak, they are lobbying on their own behalf. For that, they have come to Dortmund from Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, and eleven German cities. Among the participants also was a Ukrainian youth group that is currently active from exile in Munich.

But how can a **balanced discussion on equal terms** be facilitated between young people and professional representatives, some of whom have decades of experience? For this, IBB e.V. developed the concept of the “Youth Day” and implemented it together with an international team. On this training and preparation day, the young activists not only prepared their presentations and worked on the main topics of the symposium. In order to familiarise themselves with the stage situation, exercises that allow them to try out speaking and arguing in front of a larger audience also played an important role.

It is **unusual and remarkable** that so many youngsters take part in an international symposium. After all, political and academic consultations, even on topics such as youth work and youth policy, often take place without those who are most confronted with the consequences. In contrast, this event aimed to bring together all the groups of stakeholders, to which the young people affected clearly belong.

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# YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE

*Welcome Speech by Elke Wegener,  
Managing Director of IBB e.V.*

Good morning to all of you! On behalf of the IBB Board and our entire team I would like to thank you all for being here today. We are delighted that so many young people and youth work professionals from all over Europe are here with us. And we are also very happy to welcome representatives from funding organisations such as Stiftung Mercator and the European Cultural Foundation, as well as policymakers and administrators from the local, national and European levels. We are very pleased that you have taken the time, and that some of you even took the effort to travel a long way to attend. It's great to have you all here!

The idea to organise this conference has its roots in the experiences we made since 2008, when we started to build a European network of youth organisations, with the goal to create opportunities for all youths to gain international experiences. Generation Europe – The Academy is now the fifth iteration of our funding programme for European youth cooperation. More than 40 youth work organisations from 14 European countries are taking part. In our network, young people form local groups and connect at international youth encounters.

In their local groups, they identify local problems and develop local action plans to address them. With combining local youth work and transnational exchange, we are creating opportunities for participation on local and European level, regardless of origin, parents' income and previous success in the formal education system. Today, the young people are going to present some of their work, and we are also going to talk about the challenges they are facing.

The main approach over the years has been to learn together and from each other, at European level and in the interests of youth and youth organisations. Over the time, topics and methods evolved. After 2015 – the year in which so many refugees came to Europe and, on

the other hand, democratic systems around the world came under increasing pressure – civic education took on greater importance in the projects that followed. And the projects in our network became even more participatory – and more challenging. But with great motivation and commitment of everybody involved, they have been successful.

Yes, great motivation and high commitment, that is what keeps youth work and youth participation alive. Because although we are successful, over the last 15 years we have learnt a lot about the situation of youth work and especially international youth work in Europe. And while we have indeed managed to build up a vibrant and evolving network, we have on the other hand seen the situation getting worse in several ways.

The increasing challenges during the last years put a lot of extra burdens on youth organisations, their staff members, and also on young people who want to get involved. Today, we will be discussing what these burdens are, and what we can do to preserve, promote and enhance the work of youth organisations and youth groups. I am really curious on your perspectives on the situation and your ideas!

With this in mind, I would like to take a brief look at the beginning of the IBB. Since 1986, we are working as an independent NGO, based here, in Dortmund, Germany. IBB is the German abbreviation for “International Association for Education and Exchange”. Our motto is “Overcome Boundaries”. All our projects are about bringing people together, building bridges, and if possible strong networks to help voices to be heard.

We are promoting democracy and participation through cooperation on eye-level across national borders. We network civil society actors, create places of learning and remembrance, develop seminars, training courses, projects and support programmes for non-governmental organisations, young people and adults. And that’s why this symposium, this opportunity to network and exchange with all of you, is so important for us: From our nearly 40-yearlong work, we know about



the power of civil society networks. We know about all the wonderful things that can evolve out of international cooperation. But we also know that none of this happens by itself, and that successful and essential structures can also collapse if they are not sufficiently funded and supported. And that we need to join forces to maintain what we have achieved, and continue to build on it.

That's why we are here today. I am looking forward to the upcoming discussions and hope that we will develop good ideas on how we can improve the working conditions and the situation of international youth work, in the interests of young people and the future of our democratic societies. And now I wish you all a good time gaining impressions of active young citizens throughout Europe.



# WORKSHOP ANNOUNCEMENTS

## Youth Work and Civic Education

Democracy in Europe is under pressure. What does youth work contribute to promoting and maintaining a democratic civil society? How can we head off the dangers that come with weakening and underfunding the working field?

## Local Youth Work and Europe

Organising youth groups locally and bringing in a European perspective is an enrichment for both fields. How can local projects benefit from international networking, and what conditions are necessary for this? How can sustainable networks of international cooperation be established, maintained and strengthened under changing conditions?

## Youth Work and Mental Health

Wars, price increases, the aftermath of Corona, a political shift to the right: in a time of multiple crises, young people, professionals and youth work organisations are facing additional challenges. How do we deal with them? What is needed to make us and the structures in which we are active more resilient?

## Diversity and Inclusion

So far, young people with international family histories, refugee experiences, interrupted educational biographies and those from rural areas have been significantly underrepresented in international projects and formats of civic education. How can we make youth work more accessible to diverse target groups and to people with diverse access needs? How can a diverse workforce up to the management level of youth work be achieved?

## Youth Work as a Profession

When it comes to caring for children and young people, are parents and volunteers enough for this? In the struggle for social recognition of care work, sufficient funding of youth work structures plays a special role. What needs to be done to create better working conditions? What can politicians, administrators, youth work organisations and employees do to improve the situation?

### Expert Statements by

**Anja Ostermann**, co-founder and managing partner of the pan-European NGO "THE CIVICS Innovation Hub"

**Prof. Dr. Tomaž Deželan**, Chair of Policy Analysis and Public Administration at the University of Ljubljana

**Katharina van Bronswijk**, Psychologist and Behavioural Therapist, Spokesperson of Psychologists / Psychotherapists for Future e.V.

**Philipp Bryant**, special needs pedagogue and lecturer for inclusive pedagogy at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences Bochum

**Olga Kyriakidou**, youth worker and consultant, president of the Hellenic Youth Workers Association

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# TOGETHER WE CAN START A CHANGE

*Keynote by Lucia Andreatta, Project Manager  
of Generation Europe – The Academy*

Hello everybody, I am glad to be here today with all of you in a unique gathering of youth work organisations, professionals, young individuals, academics, funders, policymakers and other stakeholders. I am very pleased that you, despite your busy schedules, have taken the time for this day of exchange and thinking together. It means a lot to us – and it is important. Since 2008, I have been working in the field of non-formal education and youth work at different levels, and never before has it been in such a dramatic situation.

Have you ever had to overcome what seemed like an impossible challenge? I certainly have, when I was asked to deliver one of the central speeches at this symposium. Yes, a challenge, because trying to sum up all the problems currently plaguing the field of youth work in only 20 minutes seems really impossible. But I certainly have something to say.

We live in an interconnected world, where political, economical, social and environmental issues affect all of us, no matter in which country we live. Young people are facing increasing school dropout rates and unemployment. They are also struggling with increasing numbers of mental health conditions, often remaining unrecognised and untreated. An increasing number of young people are affected by forced migration, either as refugees or as migrants seeking better opportunities.

The European Youth Portal states that young people's mental health in the European Union is a big concern. Young people are crushed by depression and anxiety. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death among youths in the EU. Young people are also more vulnerable to economic recession than other age groups. We know this at least since the global economic crisis from 2008 to 2013. According to Eurofound, youth unemployment has risen to over 40 percent in many EU countries during these years. And the share of young people not

in employment, education or training peaked at a historical high of 16 percent of the entire EU population aged 15 to 29. It is therefore not surprising that young people were also hardest hit by job loss during the COVID-19 crisis. Young people not in education and without a job were most likely to experience housing insecurity, compared to other groups during the pandemic. 43 percent of them reported difficulties to make it to the end of the month. Yes, that's the bitter truth: One third of young people in Europe are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Many do not have access to their social rights. Many continue to face multiple discrimination, experience prejudice, and hate crimes.

On the other hand, the prevalence of youth radicalization is also growing. Research from 2022 by the Else Frankl-Brunswick Institute discusses the factors influencing young people's belief in conspiracy narratives and fake news in Germany. It notes that the level of education, particularly the desired educational qualification, plays a role in shaping these beliefs. The study highlights that teaching democracy, promoting democratic experiences and education are important when it comes to combating conspiracy beliefs among young people.

All of this confirms the importance of addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by young people. Youth work is one of the key opportunities to tackle all these issues. It is essential for a healthy generation, a resilient democracy, and an open-minded, tolerant community. Yet, in many European countries, being a youth worker is not officially recognized as a job. Youth workers often receive low pay, or none at all. I think we have a lot to do here. And I hope you are ready to start today.

I collected two practical pieces of advice from my experience, and I would like to place them in the centre of my message, because I think they can be not only useful for our work together today, but also for the tasks ahead of us. The first one is: We are a team. What we are doing and what needs to be done is a team effort. If we want to change something, we must act together, give advice to each other, and build networks. Solitary efforts lead to nowhere.

The second point is to control our emotions and focus on what we have to say. We do our job with passion and belief. So while we might feel frustration and anger about the present situation in our field of work, these emotions often hinder productive dialogue. To create change, we must set the negative feelings a bit (just a bit) aside and concentrate on our message. That way, there's hope of making a difference.

When I was looking for the perfect note to set the tone of this speech, I couldn't help but think of an article by British writer Taiye Selasi, in which she emphasises that teaching children to hate and fear each other is the preparatory strategy for an apartheid regime, a complete lack of empathy. Isn't that what we are experiencing in these times? Every time we read the news, is it not hate and fear that we see? Discrimination and desire to crush others that leads to wars and fights. Rise of violence, erosion of democracy and human rights, growth of authoritarian states.

According to research from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, discriminatory racism has increased by about 30 percent in some central European countries from 2016 to 2022. We build real walls to divide people, to avoid dialogue toward diversity and peace. We deny people in need human rights while preaching European values. We watch states turn into autocracies in Europe and still talk about democracy.

Where is the Love? Is talking about real democracy and an inclusive society merely a catchphrase? Is it only a way to make us feel better, a form of self-absolution? Or a sort of "democracy washing"?

We have to make a choice, and that is why we are here today: to accept this challenge and start to discuss with each other across the borders of our own peer group. We should talk about civic education, how it can shape today's and tomorrow's young citizens, what it means to be involved in the decision process and to be active. I believe we can change the trend that sees young people disconnected from political processes, not seeing their opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives.

Imagine a group of young people coming from different backgrounds, cultures, and traditions, with a common desire to make a positive change in the world. They began by participating in a youth exchange programme that brought together groups from various countries. They learned to appreciate the wonderful diversity of humankind. They discovered that understanding and embracing these differences was the key to fostering peace and unity on a global scale. Through collaboration, they witnessed the power of teamwork across borders. They tackled issues such as climate change, poverty, and inequality, recognizing that these challenges have no national boundaries. Connecting with others through international youth work allowed them to address these issues together, pooling their ideas, resources, and passion for common goals.

Imagine how they soon realised that their international experiences were not only enriching their lives, but also transforming their communities. They began to implement the skills and knowledge they had gained in their local contexts, creating a wave of positive change. Also, the local community recognized that the young people, with their newfound global perspective, were the key to a brighter future.

Is this just a made up story, a fairytale? Well, instead of the word imagine, I could have used the word remember. Then you would perhaps have thought about the exhibition this morning. Because the story I told you is nothing but the sum of the stories of the about 600 young people active in the network of Generation Europe – The Academy. Despite all challenges, it is the reality of our programme.

It underlines how important it is to exchange ideas and get to know each other, across all boundaries. How important it is to combine local and international activities. And yes, you could also summarise it with our motto: “Act local – connect European – think global!”

This work has to continue. We want to continue! But there are some problems. Youth work faces a lack of funding, just when the needs of young people are growing, especially during these times of multiple crises. Fortunately, the absurd proposal by the German government to



cut funding to youth work by 19 percent in next year's federal budget seems to be withdrawn – after a big protest. But in view of the current price increases, the real value of public funding is still decreasing significantly, and private foundations are also getting less supportive.

Youth work is important, we experience it every day. The psychological and social consequences of the Corona pandemic are far from over, war experiences have come even closer to us than they already were. A lot of countries are moving backward on social rights and equality. All of these factors deeply affect, engage, and concern young people, and it is our responsibility to address that, and find answers to the many questions together with them. This is our job!

As our responsibilities grow, while resources fall short, many of us are left with no choice but to use the only resource we have: ourselves. In 2020, during the previous phase of the Generation Europe programme, we published Guidance Papers, descriptions of the conditions and needs of youth work and youth policy in different European countries. Even if there were some differences, the papers made clear that some challenges were and are the same in all the countries: the struggle with difficult funding situations, that leads to unstable positions and work environments, lack of structures, lack of structured work, lack of recognition with consequently high-stress working conditions and burnout risks.

Unfortunately, the situation described three years ago in the Guidance Papers did not improve. On the contrary, it got worse. Every new crisis we have been through has pushed local and international youth work into a corner, alone. A lot of organisations are not existing anymore, and a lot of colleagues decided to leave our working field.

The youth work professionals from our network, who were the authors of the Guidance Papers in their respective countries, provided some ideas on how to improve the situation. One proposal was to support the Bonn Process and to organise joint events like this one. Therefore, it's necessary for us to use this opportunity to discuss how to really address these issues.

I am reminded of an experience in 2015, when I worked at a youth centre in Germany. We had to convince the municipal administration to fund an additional part-time employee. The number of children and young people at the centre was growing, and the single full-time worker couldn't handle the load with just two interns.

But the city continued to insist that there was no need. So, we invited the entire community to the centre and encouraged the kids to show all the important things they could do there, to make clear that the centre was well-attended and necessary. Well, it turned out to be a really chaotic situation, children and youths running around everywhere trying to interact and explain what they could do in the centre, showing the people posters and group works... I don't know if it was the big noise or a desire to escape, but eventually, the city representatives said: "Yes, we see the need," and they granted us an additional staff member.

This memory helps me understand the importance of our work here today. But please, do not be afraid, I want to reassure you: we do not intend to do anything wild, noisy or chaotic with you today. We are a quite peaceful and civilised crowd. What I mean is something else: We want to invite you to get loud together with us – so that we all become loudspeakers for change. Let's find a way to raise our voices together, let's make the most of this moment of sharing!

The young generation is important. Youth work is important. Youth workers are important to support and engage young people in their personal, social, and educational development. Not only if we want to build a better society, but also because youth work is the bridge between the formal education system and personal life. Youth workers act as mentors and role models, offering guidance, support, and a listening ear to young people who are facing various challenges in their lives.

One of the challenges, that I've already mentioned, is mental health, a growing concern for young people worldwide. We have 60 percent more clinical depressions of young people compared to 2019 and, as we wrote in our publication on wellbeing in youth work, this is often

combined with eating disorders (a 75 percent increase since 2019) and anxiety disorders (a plus of 40 percent since 2019.) Adolescents with mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination, stigma, educational difficulties, risk-taking behaviours, physical ill-health and human rights violations. We need structures, resources, and concrete support to address these realities!

And now I'll tell you a secret: There is actually already research, for example from Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, listing what needs to be done to solve certain problems. For example: to take youth issues seriously, to build safety nets and structures to support them. And: to make civic education and non-formal education more accessible, more permanent and continuous. And: to organise direct forms of participation, such as meeting at eye level, promoting solidarity, and providing opportunities for involvement and being heard. And guess what the research indicated as really counterproductive? Budget cuts in the social sector!

So, to revisit the points I emphasised at the beginning: now more than ever, it's necessary for us to act as a team, to improve the reality for all. We must also, with a touch of emotions, outline clear intentions that lead to concrete and achievable solutions. Over the last years I more and more can relate to this passage from Salman Natour's book "Memory":

"You speak all the time, and we listen to you and try to make you understand that there is an error in the equation... But you don't listen to us. Everything we say gets lost in translation, even when we speak the same language. And then we realise that nothing can make you hear us and listen to us unless we raise our voices."

I took you on the journey to see the incredible power and value of youth work. I showed you the challenges and threats to youth work and to democracy. I am not doing it the first time and you are not the first ones I am telling this to. But I am doing it today with the hope to be heard and the belief that together we start the change!



# YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE – MISSION (IM)POSSIBLE?

*Symposium Report by Prof. Dr. Tomaž Deželan, Chair of Policy Analysis and Public Administration, University of Ljubljana*

## 1. DIRE CONDITIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE

The symposium is based on the general observation that the current conditions for young people are disastrous. It is a long-established fact that young people have been among the biggest victims of the crises of the last decade, be it the austerity measures following the global financial collapse or the Covid-19 pandemic (see Lowe, 2022; Verick, 2009; Eurofound, 2021). Essentially, this means that the cost of living is skyrocketing, there is a lack of decent housing options, job-related disruptions and a lack of well-paid, stable and less precarious jobs, which contributes to people often falling into financial difficulties (see OECD, 2021). The European Youth Forum therefore speaks of “frozen progress”, as Europe has made very little progress on youth rights and well-being since 2011 and no progress at all since 2018 (EYF, 2023). In its Youth Index, the Forum points to a standstill in several indicators and components, such as personal safety and environmental quality. Of particular concern is that today’s young citizens are threatened by violations of their personal rights and their participation and representation in the political sphere is severely undermined.

Taking into account the abovementioned trends, youth employment rates are low, especially in southern European EU Member States (see Eurostat, 2022: 14), with the proportion of involuntary fixed-term contracts much higher for young people than for other age groups, with the percentage exceeding 30% in the worst performing EU Member States (ibid.: 16). As a result, a quarter (25.3%) of young people are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (ibid.: 22), which certainly makes young people concerned about their future. In fact, the

OECD shows that 63% of young people are concerned about their overall social and economic well-being (OECD, 2021). And that's not all, as young people are not only concerned about the cost of living (e.g. food and energy prices; 93%) and poverty and social exclusion (77%), but also about climate change (84%) and the spread of war (76%) (see EP, 2022: 25).

This has a huge negative impact on their mental health. To be precise, the EYF (2023a) report on young people's mental wellbeing emphasises the link between societal factors and mental wellbeing, highlighting the crucial role of an inclusive social environment in promoting positive mental health outcomes and thus pointing to the impact of risk factors for mental health (e.g. job insecurity). Poor mental health among young people is a growing concern in the EU, with almost one in two young Europeans having unmet mental health needs, and in several EU countries the proportion of young people reporting symptoms of depression has more than doubled during the pandemic (OECD/EU, 2022). As young people are more likely to report deteriorating mental health (OECD, 2021: 9), they are also more prone to suicide, which is already one of the leading causes of premature death among European youth (EP, 2023).

It is thus a widespread perception that governments across Europe are failing young people (EYF, 2023). The unmet need for public investment in young people, especially in times of constant crisis, shows that young people are very low on the political agenda. The lack of sufficient investment and political will for a turnaround can be explained by the numerical disadvantage of young people in today's European societies, as the proportion of young people is declining and is expected to continue to decline for at least half a century (see Eurostat, 2022). It is therefore not surprising that two out of three young people in OECD countries believe that the government should do more or much more to ensure their economic and social security and well-being (OECD, 2021: 9). This is also indicated by young people's direct personal experiences, as four in ten young people have not had access to public services when needed (ibid.: 10).



## 2. SUFFERING SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Youth work is in a position to be at the forefront of efforts to reduce the burden on young people, as its aim is to support young people's personal development, social integration and active citizenship (COE, 2017). As the quintessence of social practise working with young people and the societies in which they live, youth work contributes to young people's well-being by enhancing their sense of belonging and fostering their ability to make favourable choices, supporting positive and purposeful transitions in personal, civic, economic and cultural life; enables the development of competences that facilitate lifelong learning, active citizenship and labour market participation; promotes the development of diverse skills such as creativity, critical thinking, conflict management, digital and information literacy and leadership; and strengthens young people's resilience and thus their ability to resist negative influences and behaviours (COE, 2017: 10).

But youth work is also suffering. The European Commission's study (2021) on youth work in the EU points out that youth work needs more sustainable and operational funding as opposed to short-term project-based funding and an improvement in its recognition. This means that opportunities to recognise non-formal education and the knowledge acquired through youth work need to be improved and that the contribution of youth work to social inclusion needs to be better recognised. The lack of structural funding also hinders the attractiveness of careers in the sector and the lack of support for employment conditions from national governments, professional organisations and trade unions, especially in practise architectures in need of development, highlighting a gap in support mechanisms. Youth work is therefore constantly facing fundamental challenges and needs to adapt to changing needs. The existence and sustainability of many youth associations, youth work organisations and youth services is under threat since the restrictions on social contact had long-lasting impact on the way youth work operates and therefore on young people, particularly disadvantaged ones (The Council, 2020).

The 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Convention therefore called for the establishment of a European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA) to promote the further development and strengthening of quality and innovation in youth work and its recognition; to ensure the existence of sustainable structures and the availability of adequate resources for quality youth work; and to strengthen the capacity of youth work to empower young people to contribute to the development of inclusive, sustainable, democratic, pluralistic and peaceful societies (EYWC, 2015). As the 3<sup>rd</sup> European Youth Work Convention in 2020 marked the beginning of the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda – also known as the Bonn Process – with the aim of further developing youth work practise and policy in Europe, strengthening the quality, recognition and innovation of youth work and, in particular, responding to the structural and professional challenges in the field of youth work, the practise infrastructure had high hopes for this process. The survey on the implementation of the Bonn Process (JUGEND für Europa, 2023a: 44) suggests that implementation is not going so smoothly after all, as there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of recognising the agenda, increasing political interest, penetrating the subnational and local levels, and uncertainty about the Bonn Process in general.

In an effort to support the Bonn Process – or rather, to “bring the Bonn Process home”, as the report of the Bonn process meet-up 2023 calls it (JUGEND für Europa, 2023) – and under the impression that the European Youth Work Agenda is not being implemented as quickly as it could be, the International Association for Education and Exchange (IBB e.V.) and Generation Europe pushed for stronger action to improve the position of youth work (organisations), but above all to tackle the current grievances of young people across Europe.

### 3. GENERATION EUROPE AND THE SYMPOSIUM

Generation Europe, an international network of youth work organisations promoting an active European civil society, motivates participants to take joint political action and creates the necessary foundations. This cooperation, created under the auspices of the International Association for Education and Exchange (IBB e.V.), connects more than 40 youth work institutions from 14 European countries on the basis of previous cooperation within the framework of the European work camp programme ewoca<sup>3</sup> (2009–2017) and the Pimp my Europe project (2016–2018). This partnership works with a unique concept by enabling young people from three countries to work together continuously to address an identified common problem over a three-year period by tackling it together in international encounters (meetings) and individual project activities in their local environment. In this way, they connect the local level with the European level and develop and test their social interventions within this framework.

The diversity of project partners includes independent youth organisations, youth centres run by various organisations, vocational training institutions and municipal institutions. By funding project partnerships over three years rather than individual projects, Generation Europe creates the basis for sustainable, long-term cooperation. An important part of the concept is an accompanying programme for the participating youth work professionals. They further develop their capacities and try out innovations in the context of international encounters. Generation Europe thus contributes equally to the professionalisation of international youth work as it empowers young people from different backgrounds, especially those who were previously excluded from political processes (e.g. with a migration background, runaways from home, school drop-outs, etc.).

Generation Europe also aims to support and further develop youth policy strategies in Europe. Through steering committees, stakeholder meetings, conferences and other relevant formats, the participants of the programme meet with funding partners, experts and international

stakeholders to connect the different policy levels with the relevant actors in the youth field and young people directly. Through all these measures, Generation Europe facilitates encounters and exchanges between a wide range of stakeholders to better articulate their needs and contribute to a more balanced and informed youth policy debate. In order to maintain its political relevance, the network has formed a dedicated lobby group to capitalise on the work done through the various activities in a robust and concerted manner. To be precise, the results of the activities in the 2018–2020 period (Generation Europe – Young Democracy in Action) have already contributed to the Guidance Papers for the Recommended Course of Action in the Field of Youth Work (Teiting, 2021), which also served as a general framework for the future activities.

The Guidance Papers call for future projects that are orientated towards youth work policy and actively involve policy decision-makers at local, regional, national and European level. In this way, multilateral cooperation is to be created that enables the exchange of best practises, the discussion of existing youth (work) strategies and the harmonisation of youth work perspectives with the active participation of young people. The Guidance Papers and the processes they initiate (Generation Europe: The Academy) thus serve as a supporting structure for the overarching lobbying and advocacy dimension of the network, providing a solid and active transnational multilateral and multi-stakeholder platform for the implementation of the objectives formulated in the Guidance Papers as well as the European Youth Work Agenda. The symposium “Youth Work in Europe – Mission (Im)possible?”, which took place in Dortmund on 13 November 2023, is a good example of this.

The symposium builds on the need for closer cooperation between youth work and policy makers to raise awareness of the value of youth work, improve knowledge and understanding of what youth work can achieve (EC, 2021), and inform the various stakeholders about the needs and perspectives of young people who lack the framework to voice their concerns. In doing so, it directly addresses the general dis-

regard of young people's voices by public authorities, which the OECD (2021) identifies as one of the key messages that governments should endeavour to address. The symposium also took into account the so-called youth policy triangle principle (see Youth Partnership, 2023) and included representatives from public authorities working within the mandate to design and implement policies, youth (work) organisations representing young people's needs and concerns, as well as youth work practitioners and the academic community providing evidence on the situation of young people. However, the symposium went one step further and placed young people at the centre of interest not only as a target group, but also as active co-creators of the solutions developed.

The exchange between politicians, youth work experts, academics, administrators and young people themselves had the common goal of developing solutions to the problems faced by international youth work and young people worldwide. In order to facilitate an informed discussion at eye level, the young people took part in a training in the form of a "Youth Day" organised by an international team of youth work professionals from the Generation Europe – The Academy network. The training in the form of a preparation day enabled the young participants to explore the main themes of the symposium, test their positions and prepare their contributions for the following day. To familiarise themselves with the stage situation, they also went through a series of exercises that allowed them to try out speaking and arguing in front of a larger audience. During the symposium, participants worked in mixed groups – consisting of young people, policy makers, youth workers and academics – and tackled burning issues defined during the symposium (civic education, diversity and inclusion, well-being and mental health, youth work as a profession and local youth work in Europe).





## 4. INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The working groups, which dealt with five topics, looked for solutions to the most important challenges in an unexpected way, as the group's knowledge and debates were shaped by lived experience and expertise.

In terms of **diversity and inclusion**, the workshop showed that the topic is fraught with emotion and needs more attention from different stakeholders to understand what promotes inclusion and what hinders it. Deepening knowledge about inclusion and creating opportunities to share knowledge about it are seen as important tools for a more inclusive society. Participants also recognised that many policies dealing with diversity and inclusion issues perpetuate stereotypes and/or do not promote togetherness. At the same time, the group reiterated the importance of physical and virtual accessibility for participation, intersectionality, the challenges of diversity in identity construction, the ghettoisation of members of a social group and the persistence of social class. Education and communication were also explored to combat marginalisation and Islamophobia, including in relation to the current (public) spaces that often create discomfort for people with certain intersections.

The **wellbeing and mental health** working group addressed the profound impact of mental health issues on young people's physical wellbeing and emphasised the urgency of effective strategies in the face of worsening crises. Discussions highlighted the higher likelihood of burnout among young professionals and emphasised the importance of work-life balance and appropriate education and training. Academic pressures and societal expectations were found to be significant stressors, exacerbated by external factors, creating an environment where open conversations and awareness-raising initiatives were seen as crucial. Inadequate support systems for young people, coupled with dissatisfaction among youth work professionals, emphasised the need for a comprehensive understanding of the depth of young people's mental health issues and the need to address the lack of appropriate support systems. The group also explored the need for a new narrative

for the successful design and implementation of effective emotional education strategies.

The workshop on **civic education** focused on the link between civic education and youth work, emphasising that civic education should not necessarily be linked to institutional politics, but should rather have a broader social dimension. At the same time, it highlighted the resources needed to empower youth to participate more actively in society and the need to link formal and non-formal civic education methods and programmes, including through clear support for this process from policy makers. Youth work was identified as an effective tool to support these integration efforts and as an effective promoter of democracy education. The workshop also highlighted the close link between civic education and tolerance, even for those who are not active, as (self-)reflection on civic values is the necessary first step. The group also felt that providing young people with the necessary resources to become active, whether through volunteering, information or some other form of conventional participation or protest, should be prioritised, whether through acquiring the knowledge necessary for participation or something else.

Based on the simple question of why someone would work as a youth work professional, the participants explored the world of **youth work as a profession**. An important question that the group also addressed was how it could be better recognised. There was a consensus that youth work needs an improvement in qualifications across Europe, which also requires Europe-wide co-operation in this area. The opportunity to study youth work and gain a relevant qualification was seen as a crucial step forward. But adequate education and training opportunities are only one step towards recognising the profession and its role in society. More systematic (structural) funding and support must be ensured for this, as secure professionals are an important step on the path to good professionals. In addition to efforts to achieve recognition and stability, the profession also need campaigns that increase the attractiveness of youth work and the recognition of its positive impact in a broader society.

**Local youth work in Europe** promoted this discussion by emphasising the need for spaces where young people can meet, connect, plan and develop different ideas and actions. There was a general consensus on the importance of securing sufficient and stable funding for open and free civic spaces for young people and recognising their value in general. The fact that young people use commercial (offline and online) spaces because there are no open and free civic spaces means that young people are marginalised and have fewer opportunities needs to be recognised and actively addressed. The group felt that the capacity of local youth work to address these issues could be strengthened by investing in the internationalisation efforts of local youth work organisations and initiatives.

Based on five strands of discussion carried out in thematic working groups, the symposium created its own “signposts” (3<sup>rd</sup> European Youth Work Convention) for future endeavours in the field of youth work and for concerted efforts to address the issues facing young people across Europe today.

In an endeavour to improve the **wellbeing and mental health** of young people, the relevant stakeholders in this area should:

- Create and promote new narratives of success (including in school settings) to alleviate the multiple pressures placed on young people.
- Implement strategies for the emotional education and training of young people to equip them with tools to manage stress and pressure effectively, including through the integration of mental health education into the wider curriculum and increased educational counselling.
- Provide platforms for open discussions about mental health, including through the creation of free, safe and professionally supported spaces for young people to meet and discuss mental health issues.
- Provide accessible therapeutic resources, including the availability of psychotherapists, to support those who need help.

- Initiate and support awareness campaigns to reduce the stigma associated with mental health.
- Improve access to adequate training opportunities for youth workers so they can effectively address the mental health needs of young people.

The participants at the symposium were convinced that **promoting diversity and strengthening inclusion** in our society has to be performed through:

- The need to work exclusively with people with functional diversity on measures to strengthen and promote diversity and inclusion.
- A better understanding of the mechanisms of social class and hierarchy and the ways in which they hinder the diversity of societies and inclusion of different groups experiencing multiple levels of exclusion (intersectionality).
- Creating educational tools based on respect for the different identities in a society, without them having to survive or adapt, but rather being accepted and brought together.
- Sharing opinions based on emotional connection, where peer-to-peer discussions and comments on differences and gaps are common.

In order to **strengthen civic education**, the symposium participants stated that:

- Civic education through youth work needs to be strengthened to achieve the goals of civic education that go beyond political literacy and participation in institutional politics.
- Recognition of the impact youth work on young people's civic competence needs to be extended, including to civic educators (working in the formal education system).

- Non-formal education methods and approaches must become compulsory in civic education in the formal education system. Adequate financial and human resources support must be provided.
- Civic education activities must include skills to effectively communicate the feelings and thoughts of individuals.
- The democratic components of civic education must be defined and protected so that they cannot be confused with political positions.
- Programmes aimed at the exchange and mobility of young people and youth leaders need to be strengthened, also from the point of view of designing them in a way that truly supports young people's participation in these activities from their inception to their evaluation.

In order to improve **youth work as a profession**, the symposium participants called for:

- Creation of a pan-European interdisciplinary Master's programme in youth work that includes a significant proportion of internships in youth work settings and has a strong international youth work dimension.
- Creation and implementation of a modular (re)qualification programme for a career change into youth work based on the European Competence Framework for Youth Work.
- Creation of a European Youth Leader Card for young volunteers in conjunction with the Discover EU Ticket.
- Launching of a pan-European campaign to demonstrate the positive impact of national and international youth work and its economic value, combined with increased efforts to strengthen the recognition of youth work and youth work outcomes.

- Improvement of the motivation of individuals to pursue a career in youth work by (a) demonstrating the positive impact of youth work on youth workers themselves and on society, (b) improving working conditions for youth workers, (c) strengthening the financial stability and remuneration of youth work professionals, and (d) improving support for quality youth work.

And in order to improve the conditions for **local youth work in Europe**, the symposium participants called for the following in particular:

- Increased cooperation between schools and local youth (work) spaces to jointly implement activities that are geared towards the needs of young people.





- Increased funding for local youth work activities that have an internationalisation dimension and enable young people to experience intercultural encounters and thus acquire intercultural skills.
- Protecting and strengthening (virtual and physical) free and safe civic spaces that offer a refuge from intensive commercialisation and gentrification, especially for disadvantaged young people. Local youth work centres are prime examples of such spaces, which is why their existence and strengthening must be supported.

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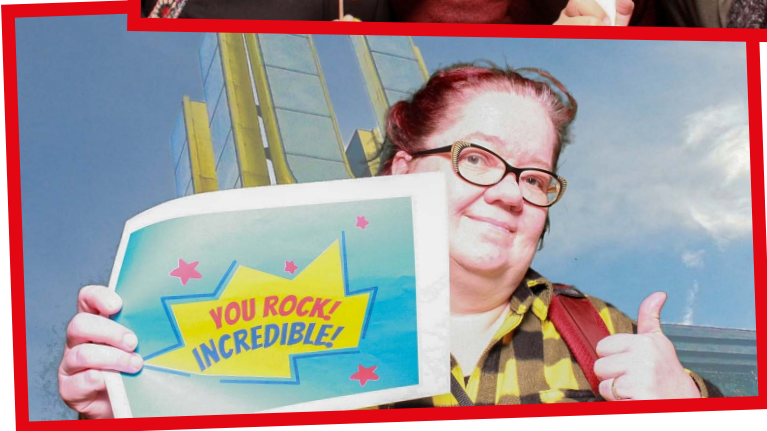
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## PHOTO BOOTH IMPRESSIONS...



...FROM THE SYMPOSIUM

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For any questions, reach out to:

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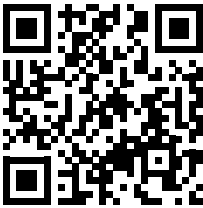
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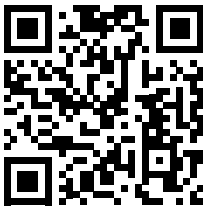
## VIDEOS FROM THE SYMPOSIUM



**Is youth work a fragile, endangered working field or a mighty dragon rising to save the future?**

Filmmaker Harry Abraham has followed the youngsters and youth work professionals from ten European countries to the symposium. Watch the documentation here: [youtu.be/HpsNSCbGBos](https://youtu.be/HpsNSCbGBos)

**This is a rescue mission,  
let's join forces!**



**Together we can make youth work possible!**

In just over three minutes, this short video shows what the symposium was all about.

Watch it here: [youtu.be/VzVbjiWfdEY](https://youtu.be/VzVbjiWfdEY)



# GENERATION EUROPE – THE ACADEMY



...is an international network of youth work organisations and a funding programme for European cooperation. Young people raise their voices and take action: in their local communities and across all boundaries. Together, we are contributing to an active and inclusive European citizenship.

The young people of our network form local groups and connect at international youth encounters. Together, we create opportunities for participation on local and European level, regardless of origin, parents' income and previous success in the formal education system. In each of our project partnerships, youth from three countries work together. They identify local problems and support each other to address them.

## ABOUT IBB E.V.

The **International Association for Education and Exchange (IBB e.V.)** is an institutionally and politically independent non-profit organisation based in Dortmund, Germany. We enable socially engaged actors to collaborate across national borders. To involve more people, we develop seminars, trainings, and projects for young people as well as adults.



**IBB**

Internationales  
Bildungs- und  
Begegnungswerk

With our activities, we offer opportunities for personal encounters, engagement with history and networking for more sustainability and social justice. IBB sees itself as part of a European civil society that strives for change within its countries as well as across borders. In a changing world with new and old conflicts, we develop perspectives for cooperation and understanding, in order to promote active citizenship and strengthen peaceful living together.



