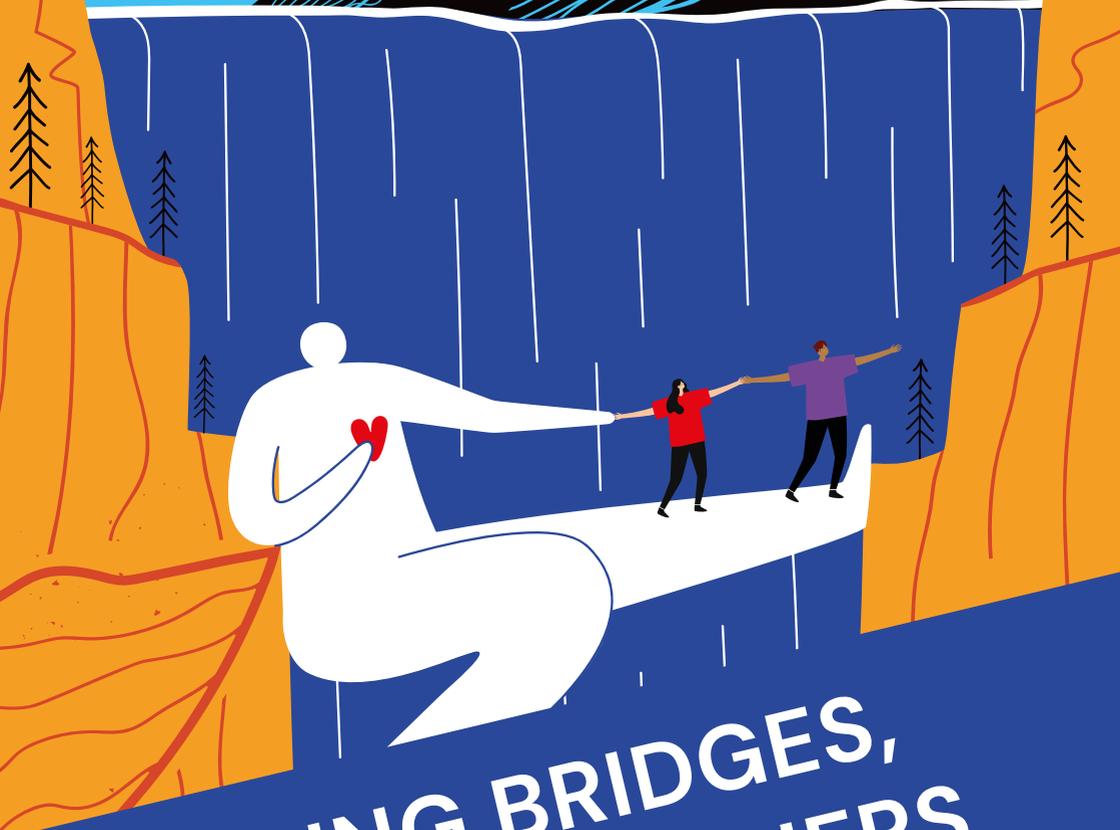


**GENERATION
EUROPE**
The Academy



BUILDING BRIDGES, BREAKING BARRIERS

Documentation of the European Youth Work Symposium
28 October 2024 | Dortmund, Germany



IBB
Internationales
Bildungs- und
Begegnungswerk

Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers

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OVERVIEW

YOUTH WORK AT ITS LIMIT

Better conditions for youth work to preserve democracy in Europe – that is what youth workers from European youth work organisations and young people from 14 countries are calling for. At the European Youth Work Symposium, they met with representatives from academia, politics and administration. The motto of the event: building bridges, breaking barriers.

Those who attended the international event in Dortmund on 28 October 2024 were greeted by a colourful exhibition. Anti-discrimination initiatives in Spain and Hungary, an eco-festival in Poland, and a campaign for more practical life experience in school lessons in Germany: in total, 31 such best-practice examples were presented by European youth groups in the foyer of the 'Dortmunder U'.

GREAT PROJECTS, HUGE PROBLEMS

So, is everything fine in the field of youth work? Unfortunately, not, says Jocelyne Jakob, managing director of the International Association for Education and Exchange. Based in Dortmund, the association has been coordinating networks and funding programmes for the cooperation of European youth institutions for more than 15 years. "What young people achieve is fantastic," says Jakob. "But many organisations that make it all possible are at their wits' end. We are struggling with rising costs, shrinking budgets and a lack of sustainable structures."

Jocelyne Jakob reports that an increasing number of professionals are leaving the field due to overwork and a lack of support. "This year, two of our partner organisations had to leave the Generation Europe network and stop this kind of youth work." The rest of the programme, which enables local projects and European networking in more than 40 municipalities, is currently only secured until the end of 2025. "Youth

BUILDING BRIDGES BREAKING BARRIERS

EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK SYMPOSIUM 24'10'28

programmes for a strong civil society are being called into question while authoritarian thinking is on the rise across Europe,” Jakob continued. “I’m worried that something is going to slip.”

WORKING TOGETHER TO FIND SOLUTIONS

The participants of the Symposium discussed in working groups what needs to be done to safeguard youth work in Europe. Guided by experts, they discussed the working conditions of youth workers, the mental health of young people, and concepts for more inclusion. Another working group made it clear that international youth projects are most effective when they are integrated into permanent local youth work structures. There was also an exchange of views on the common interests of active young people and those who decide on the funding of youth work.

Around a third of the participants from the fourteen countries were young people who are themselves active in international projects as part of the Generation Europe – The Academy network. Youth work professionals made up another third of the plenary, along with representatives of relevant ministries, representatives of local authorities, other funding agencies and researchers.

ENABLING DISCUSSIONS ON EYE LEVEL

But how can young people discuss pressing issues on equal terms with representatives from politics, academia and administration, some of whom have decades of experience? For this, an international team of

youth work professionals from IBB e.V. and the Generation Europe network developed the concept of a special training and preparation day for the young activists. On Youth Day, the youngsters worked on the topics they wanted to discuss with the other stakeholders, could get used to the stage situation and to speaking in front of a larger audience.

Involving so many young people in the international Symposium was part of the concept, says Jocelyne Jakob. "Far too often, discussions about youth policy take place without those who are most directly affected by the consequences. We want to overcome these barriers to jointly establish a solid foundation for youth work in Europe."





SYMPOSIUM REPORT

by Gisele Evrard

INTRODUCTION

The European Youth Work Symposium 'Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers' brought together a motivated and inspiring mix of young people, policymakers, and youth work professionals, all committed to improving the conditions for youth work to maintain and expand democracy and social inclusion in Europe. Participants shared their ideas, experiences, and hopes, focusing on the important role young people play in preparing for the future and shaping the present.

The event was preceded by the Youth Day, where young people from twelve European countries engaged in this space for exchange and advocacy, addressing issues such as the sustainability of local projects, inclusion and diversity, mental health and well-being, civic education, and youth work as a profession. Besides its focus on promoting and safeguarding the participation of young people in making sure that their voices are heard and valued in debates that affect them, the Youth Day was also an opportunity for the participants to prepare for the Symposium and the presentation of their projects.

When opening the Youth Day, Lucia Andreatta, Programme and Team Coordinator at IBB e.V., described her path from being a participant to having a leading position in Generation Europe – The Academy, highlighting how participants in European youth initiatives often remain deeply engaged in civic participation. The path leading to Generation Europe – The Academy began 15 years ago when IBB e.V. launched the European workcamp programme ewoca³. This enabled international youth encounters and trilateral project partnerships for three consecutive years under the motto 'Education for Sustainable Development'. In the network, the need to organise projects in the thematic fields of



human rights, civic education and active citizenship grew. IBB e.V. responded with the funding programmes 'Pimp my Europe' (2017–2018) and 'Generation Europe – Young Democracy in Action' (2018–2020), focusing on democratic participation and addressing anti-discrimination and equal opportunities while reflecting that local anchoring of youth work is crucial for developing a European network. With 'Generation Europe – The Academy', IBB e.V. and its network partners have further developed the concept so that, since 2021, the focus on supporting local youth groups to implement local projects in their communities became a core pillar of the network.

Lucia Andreatta emphasised how much local and international activities, conferences and training offers, and the European Action Week¹, among others, have made the programme visible and known to stakeholders and demonstrated the effectiveness of youth engagement. She also pointed out that the voices, stories, experiences and knowledge of the young people involved in international projects are very important for the topics tackled during the Symposium.

Through working groups, plenary sessions, and panel discussions, the Symposium tackled topics such as mental health, human rights, social justice, and democratic participation. It allowed the stakeholders to reflect upon and discuss the challenges facing the field of youth work nowadays, and to strengthen cooperation. The event was a follow-up to the previous year's Symposium 'Youth Work in Europe – Mission (Im)possible?', which IBB e.V. and youth work professionals from the network of Generation Europe – The Academy had also organised in Dortmund, Germany.²

- 1 During the European Action Week, 04–11 October 2024, local youth groups across Europe ran activities and events simultaneously, presenting their community work while demonstrating that they are part of a larger European network. It boosted the visibility of local initiatives while highlighting the connection between local and international youth work.
- 2 Youth Work in Europe: Mission (Im)possible? Documentation of the Symposium to Promote Dialogue Between Youth, Youth Work and Politics. Published by IBB e.V., 1st ed. March 2024: <https://generationeurope.org/symposium-2023>

Involving young people in a coordinated cross-sectional approach is essential for building democratic societies that foster inclusion and shared responsibility. When young people are empowered to co-create and contribute to decision-making processes, they develop a sense of ownership and a sense of belonging. Mainstreaming their engagement in all sectors and policies ensures that their views in programmes and initiatives that influence their lives apply the principle of 'nothing about them without them'. This approach respects their autonomy and recognises their potential to innovate and bring new ideas to the table.

Moreover, when young people participate, they are more likely to trust and engage in a democratic system, creating positive engagement. Sustainable societies in which every citizen has a role to play require involving all generations, with young people being a driving force for positive change, helping to address challenges such as social inequality, climate change, and economic insecurity.

This report is not a chronological record of what happened but an attempt to present the essence of the inputs and conversations that took place, focusing on the main points and ideas that emerged. It also relates to how these discussions highlighted the need for continued funding and support for youth work and for young people to engage in their communities and beyond. Although the report mostly focuses on the Symposium, it also connects with the messages and the energy of the Youth Day, which preceded the event and contributed to stimulating discussions during the Symposium. This report is also a call to action and a plea to keep the momentum going and to ensure that the role of youth work and the voices of young people are at the forefront of decisions that influence and shape their present and future.

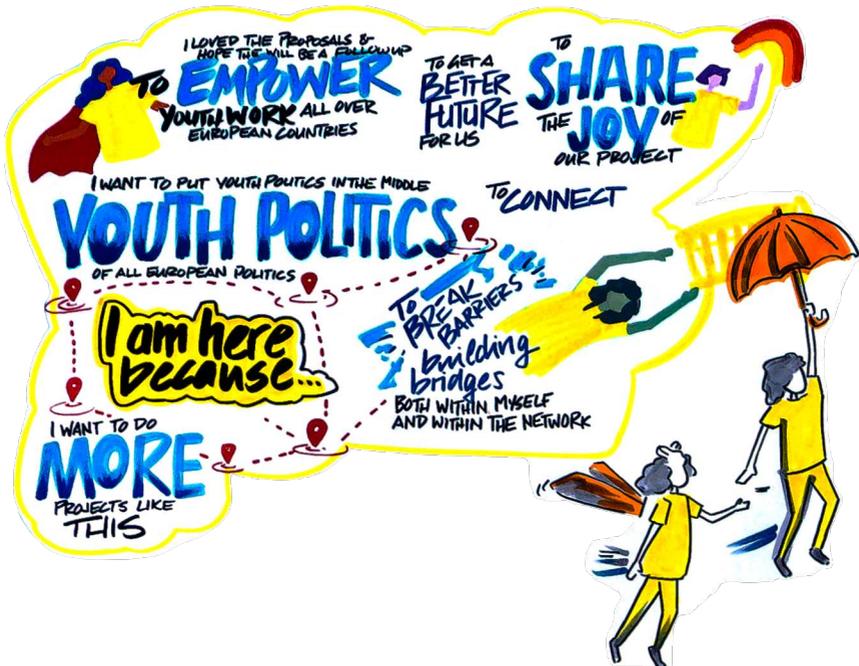
The programme of the Symposium was designed to facilitate meaningful interactions between young people, youth work professionals, and other stakeholder groups (researchers, administrators, policymakers, etc.). Such diversity was crucial not only to ensure a wider representation of opinions and experiences but also to guarantee a more systemic approach to looking at a network such as Generation Europe.

The participants of the event were encouraged to engage directly with young people, fostering mutual understanding and exploring further steps to support youth work and active citizenship.

In addition to networking times, plenary addresses and a best practices exhibition, the core discussions have been organised in five working groups:

1. **Stronger Together:** Organising Youth Workers and Their Allies
2. **Mind Matters:** Promoting Young People's Well-Being in Youth Work
3. **Overcoming Barriers:** Fostering More Inclusive, Accessible Youth Work
4. **Level Up:** Strengthening Local Youth Work for European Cooperation
5. **Active Citizenship and Youth Activism:** Two Sides of the Same Coin

Each working group explored the topic in depth with the support of an expert and through discussions and collaborative initiatives that led to possible recommendations and actionable steps.



SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE – 28.10.2025

10:00 **Arrival Talks & Official Welcome:** Why we're here and what we want, with: ■ Jocelyne Jakob (IBB e.V. | Dortmund, Germany), ■ Marit Pelzer (Centre for European Youth Policy at German Youth Institute – DJI | Munich, Germany) ■ Nien Boots (Association Càlam | Barcelona, Spain), ■ Davide Sibia (Centro di Creazione e Cultura | Florence, Italy)

11:30 **Best Practice:** Young people present their projects and experiences in European youth work

12:30 Lunch

13:30 **Keynote Speech** "Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers" by ■ Katia Henrikh, youth worker and project manager from Chernivtsi, Ukraine (DUGA – Deutsch-Ukrainische Gemeinschaft der Jugendarbeit)

14:00 **Expert Statements on the focus topics**, with: ■ Federica Demicheli (AYWA – Alliance of Youth Workers Associations | Arona, Italy), ■ Karolina Kosowska (Mental Health First Aider | Brussels, Belgium), ■ Philipp Bryant (Protestant University of Applied Sciences Bochum | Bochum, Germany), ■ Judit Balogh (Europe Goes Local | Brussels, Belgium) ■ Maren Mitterer (Fridays for Future & Gemeinsam gegen Rechts | Munich, Germany)

14:30 **Working Groups** on the five focus topics

16:45 **Panel Discussions** on the results of the working groups

18:15 **Conclusions and Outlook**

18:30 **Meet & Greet** during dinner buffet

Jocelyne Jakob

IBB e.V.



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KEY ADDRESSES

Symposium Opening Speech

*held by Jocelyne Jakob,
Managing Director of IBB e.V.*

Jocelyne Jakob extended a warm welcome to all participants. For her, the gathering is proof of the collective commitment to youth work and its essential role in fostering democracy across Europe. She reflected on IBB's nearly 40-year legacy of creating opportunities for young people to connect and learn from one another. IBB has long prioritised fostering civil society locally and across Europe by bringing diverse perspectives together and supporting participation. A milestone in this mission was the establishment of a new network of European youth organisations 15 years ago, designed to connect and empower young people who might otherwise be excluded from international programmes. This initiative evolved into what is now Generation Europe – The Academy. The three pillars of the programme are enabling young people to form local youth groups to realise projects in their communities, international youth encounters to foster collaboration and supporting the professional development of youth organisations. Today, the network's efforts align closely with the objectives of the European Youth Work Agenda. However, the network's achievements are not without challenges, particularly in securing consistent funding for staff and projects. Therefore, the focus is on the urgent need for sustainable financial support to ensure that such initiatives can continue.



Jocelyne Jakob highlighted the transformative impact of the local projects implemented in the framework of Generation Europe – The Academy. Through international meetings and actions, participants share their challenges, exchange perspectives, and collaborate to shape a more inclusive and democratic society. This hands-on approach is

what equips young people with the resources to navigate the complexities and challenges in life. Quoting the sociologist Oskar Negt, she reminded the audience that democracy must be learned and continually defended. Youth work has a special role and responsibility in this effort, particularly in today's political climate. However, she also stressed that youth workers cannot shoulder this responsibility alone; they require resources, training, and institutional support. Therefore, she called for bridging the gap between policymakers, youth work professionals, and young people, advocating for a meaningful dialogue. Youth work faces significant challenges, yet its potential for democratic societies is immense. She closed with a call to build a solid foundation for youth work, emphasising that young people and youth workers are ready to rise to the challenge.



Keynote Speech

*held by Katia Henrikh, Project Coordinator
at Association DUGA (Lviv, Ukraine)*

Katia Henrikh's keynote can be summarised as a powerful narrative of resilience, transformation, and the immense value of youth work. Drawing from her own experiences, she wove together personal anecdotes, professional insights, and profound reflections on the challenges that youth workers face, the societal impact of their work and efforts, and the enduring hope for a better future.

She began with an emotional recollection from her childhood in Ukraine, describing how the harsh and discouraging remarks of her maths teacher left her feeling inadequate, both educationally and personally. This early experience, coupled with the limitations of a rigid formal education system, set the stage for her discovery of youth work – a world she described as 'magical'. Her first youth encounter in Germany was an eye-opening and transformative experience, where she encountered acceptance, inspiration, and empowerment. It was during this time that she decided to dedicate herself to youth work, aspiring to help others and contribute to meaningful change. Katia shared how her journey in

youth work began with uncertainty and self-doubt. Despite feeling unprepared and questioning her competences, she accepted a role as a youth leader. With the support of her colleagues and a commitment to learning, she grew into her responsibilities, navigating challenges, and achieving personal and professional growth. Today, standing at the Symposium, she symbolised the possibilities that arise when one remains true to their dreams and persists despite obstacles.

She also addressed the systemic challenges that youth workers face, highlighting their underpaid and often unrecognised or underappreciated roles. Through the fictional yet familiar story of Maria, a youth worker from Portugal, Katia painted a vivid picture of burnout, the challenges and sacrifices in the youth work profession, and the structural issues that require passionate individuals to leave the field. She emphasised the need for sustainable funding and institutional support to ensure that youth work can continue to fulfil its critical role in society. Katia also turned the focus to the broader context of youth work, underlining its direct link to the global challenges of inequality, conflict, and authoritarianism. She paid tribute to activists who lost their lives advocating for justice and equality. She argued that their stories stress the urgency of defending human rights and democratic values. To illustrate one of these challenges, she shared an uplifting tale of Roman, a young man from Ukraine. His persistence in planting trees despite repeated acts of sabotage inspired her deeply. His story, she said, is an example of the resilience, determination, and capacity for kindness and the desire to support change that youth work fosters. She wanted to embody Roman's spirit and encouraged others to adopt the same determination to create positive change.

Katia Henrikh concluded with a powerful call to action. She urged her audience to see the opportunity before them: to collaborate, build bridges across divides, and contribute to a better world for future generations.





INTERVIEW WITH MARIT PELZER

*Researcher at the Centre for European Youth Policy
at the German Youth Institute (DJI)*

In her interview led by Rolf van Raden, Press and Public Relations Manager at IBB e.V., Marit Pelzer brought her insights on youth work, youth policy, and participation to the Symposium. The DJI, one of Europe's largest social research institutes, is dedicated to analysing the development of children, young people and families, thus supporting and shaping evidence-based strategies for empowering young people, improving their lives.

Marit Pelzer acknowledged the frequent disconnection between the praise youth work receives from politicians and institutions and the challenges practitioners face, including short-term funding, staff shortages, and systemic barriers. She emphasised that these issues are not just perceptions but are deeply felt realities within the sector. While systemic change remains complex, she advocated for mutual understanding between stakeholders, indicating that youth workers and decision-makers need to better understand each other's roles, scope and limitations, and responsibilities. She encouraged youth workers to reflect on their own practices, adapt approaches, requesting accountability while seeking structural improvements.

Building bridges between youth workers and policymakers requires curiosity and mutual understanding. Sustainable solutions emerge when both sides learn from and hold each other accountable, acknowledging limitations and responsibilities.

Understanding divergent views on youth in policy

Marit Pelzer highlighted a key finding from her research on European policy texts: while 'youth' is a universal term, its meaning varies across cultures, languages, and professional contexts. This can lead to misun-

derstandings, even when stakeholders use the same terminology. The research revealed two predominant perspectives in European policy: young people as valuable resource for society who will shape the future and as vulnerable individuals in a phase of development. These contrasting views influence how policies are shaped and implemented.

Policymakers and practitioners must navigate cultural and linguistic differences in defining 'youth' to ensure shared understanding. Recognising young people as both active contributors and individuals needing support creates balanced and inclusive policies.

The role of funding in youth participation

Marit Pelzer's recent research explored the impact of funding programmes on fostering political participation among marginalised youth. While funding is undeniably essential, she argued that accessibility, flexibility, and infrastructure are equally necessary. Effective programmes must adapt to the needs of different groups, reduce administrative barriers, and create spaces for collaboration between young people and policy-makers. She also pointed out that participation is broader than formal actions; even non-participation can be a political statement.

Funding alone isn't enough to empower youth participation. Accessible, flexible, and well-structured programmes that address diverse needs and remove barriers are essential for genuine engagement.

The importance of youth mainstreaming

Marit stressed the need for youth mainstreaming – embedding youth perspectives across all policy areas, from transport to housing. This requires shifting political culture to ensure that youth voices are not

confined to youth policy but influence broader decision-making processes. While systemic changes at the EU level may be challenging, raising awareness about these limitations can inspire gradual shifts in how politics operates.

Youth mainstreaming broadens the impact of young people by embedding their voices across all sectors of policy. A cultural shift in politics is needed to see young people as integral to wider solutions for society.

Responding to funding cuts

When asked about the impact of funding cuts, Marit acknowledged the difficulty of presenting concrete numbers to illustrate their effects. However, she pointed to examples, such as the closure of the British Youth Council in 2024 as a severe warning. She emphasised that repetitive underfunding damages the foundations of youth work, leading to a loss of structures and opportunities over time.

Cuts to youth funding have long-term, devastating effects on structures and communities. Policymakers must be shown the realities of these consequences through concrete examples to protect and sustain youth work.

In her closing reflections, Marit Pelzer encouraged participants to look at the bigger picture, recognising that youth policy competes with other fields for attention and resources. She reiterated the importance of fostering community and collaboration, not only within youth policy but across other sectors.

»Together, we can build a unified body of youth workers, advocating for the recognition, support, and sustainability of this vital profession.«

Federica Demicheli

AYWA – Alliance of Youth Workers

Associations, Italy





WORKING GROUP RESULTS

Guided by experts and facilitators from the network of Generation Europe – The Academy, the participants of the Symposium discussed in working groups what needs to be done to safeguard youth work in Europe.

What follows is a summary of the main points tackled, the findings, emerging steps or solutions, and what can be seen as open questions. Each working group is also illustrated with statements developed by the young people during the Youth Day. More than just declarations, they express the pleas and hopes of young people about those key areas.



Working Group 1

Stronger Together: Organising Youth Workers and Their Allies

Working conditions in youth work are often difficult: temporary and inadequate funding, overlapping professional and voluntary commitments, and insufficient recognition of youth work as a profession: How should European youth workers and their allies from politics and civil society networks make their voices heard? Which organisations of co-operation have already been formed, what are their experiences, and what are the next steps to strengthen the representation of common interests? How do these needs relate to the demands of the young people involved?

Facilitated by Olga Kyriakidou, youth worker and trainer for non-formal learning, administration and youth consultancy, Kids in Action (Thessaloniki, Greece) | Input: Federica Demicheli, Board member of AYWA – Alliance of Youth Workers Associations, Vice President of NINFEA – National Informal and Non-Formal Education Association, member of the International Youth Work Trainers Guild (Arona, Italy)

Young people's statements

- "Hear our voices. Keep youth work networks alive by funding their future."
- "Connection kept youth work networks alive until now, and that's the reason to keep going."
- "Help us to keep youth work alive, because it will change the future."
- "Responsibility is important. Are you ready to take yours?"



Key takeaways

Youth work faces significant challenges in gaining adequate **recognition and visibility** across many countries, impacting its funding, professionalisation, and ability to attract and keep competent youth workers involved. The debate over whether youth work should be recognised as a distinct profession or remain a methodology within social work remains unresolved, which can complicate efforts to establish its status. This lack of recognition also hinders the development of standardised methodologies for **measuring the impact** of youth work on individuals and society, which in turn limits its capacity to secure funding and advocate effectively.

The challenges for youth workers themselves are numerous. The working field, seen as predominantly female, suffers from a **limited workforce**, worsened by insufficient funding and the temporary absence during maternity leaves. Mental health concerns are increasing, with high stress levels and limited resources for self-care. Underpayment is another critical issue, driving competent youth workers to opt for more stable and better-funded opportunities in other sectors.

Collaboration and advocacy are seen as important pathways to address these challenges. Cross-sectoral cooperation – engaging formal education institutions, private companies, municipal offices, and youth work organisations – can support bigger advocacy efforts. However, defining clear priorities and sustaining networks across these sectors remain significant obstacles. By addressing these issues, youth work can build a stronger foundation for its practitioners while ensuring that its crucial role in supporting and empowering young people is recognised and valued.

Common challenges



- **Lack of unified advocacy objectives:** The diversity of challenges in youth work makes it difficult to establish clear and focused advocacy statements and actions.
- **Funding and sustainability:** The lack of long-term funding hinders the development of stable and professional youth work structures.
- **Responsibility for civic engagement:** Uncertainty exists about whether the responsibility for initiating civic engagement lies with the state or the youth work sector itself.



Proposed solutions

- **Stronger networks and alliances:** Create and sustain youth work networks at local, national, and international levels to foster collaboration and advocacy. Develop platforms for ongoing dialogue among stakeholders to keep alliances alive and effective.
- **Impact metrics:** Develop methodologies to measure the social and individual impact of youth work to strengthen its advocacy and funding options.
- **Advocacy and lobbying:** Define clear ‘pressure points’ for advocacy that address the most pressing challenges in youth work. Engage

with governments and other stakeholders to highlight the role of youth work in fostering active citizenship.

- **Professional development:** Advocate for better onboarding and training of youth workers, including the exploration of academic recognition for youth work.

Questions for further reflection

- Should youth work be recognised as a distinct profession or remain a methodology within social work?
- How can impact measurement frameworks be standardised across different contexts?
- What strategies can be implemented to create and sustain effective youth work networks?





Working Group 2

Mind Matters: Promoting Young People's Well-Being in Youth Work

In 2023, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) declared a mental health crisis among young people. The figures are also clear on this side of the Atlantic: mental health is the most pressing health issue young Europeans are facing. What are the common challenges to the mental well-being of young people and how can resilience in the youth work system be promoted? What support do youth work programmes need to be able to respond to these challenges?

Facilitated by Marthe Behr, M.A. Democratic Politics and Communication, B. Sc. Psychologist, project manager and pedagogical staff of Krea-Jugendclub (Bergisch Gladbach, Germany) | Input: Karolina Kosowska, Mental Health First Aider, trainer and facilitator on topics including team building, well-being and stress management (Brussels, Belgium)

Young people's statements



- "We need safe spaces where to address issues, share concerns, and express ourselves."
- "We need emotional education, beyond formal spaces such as school that do not properly address those issues."
- "We need non-formal activities, for example education using games."
- "Reduce stigma and spread awareness about mental health, mental well-being, and the problems young people face."
- "We need resources for youth work, for help in general and psychological help."



Key takeaways



Creating **safe spaces** emerged as a central priority, with participants emphasising their importance in supporting young people's well-being and fostering open dialogue on related issues. These safe spaces could take the form of dedicated rooms in schools, youth centres, or public areas where young people feel secure and supported. Alternatively, they could be integrated into existing programmes by incorporating elements that build trust and reduce stigma, enabling young people to express themselves without fear of judgment or misunderstanding.

The working group also emphasised the urgent need for **education and training** to address mental health challenges effectively. Emotional education for young people should include important topics such as mental health awareness, navigating relationships, and understanding the impact of social media. At the same time, youth workers and educators require targeted training to better support young people, including first-aid training for managing emotional crises and practical tools for fostering resilience.

Raising awareness and advocacy efforts were identified as necessary steps in reducing the stigma surrounding mental health. Participants called for campaigns that use social media and public spaces to normalise conversations about well-being, making it easier for young people to seek help. Additionally, stronger and sustained advocacy are needed to secure more resources and institutional recognition for mental health initiatives in youth work, ensuring that both young people and youth workers receive the support they need. These combined efforts aim to create an environment where mental health is openly discussed, and stigma is actively dismantled.



Common challenges

- **Stigma:** Self-stigma, public and structural stigma surrounding mental health continue to hinder open dialogue and access to support.
- **Lack of resources:** Youth work and youth workers often suffer from insufficient training, personnel, funding to address well-being effectively.
- **Cultural and structural barriers:** Differences in cultural norms and systemic constraints within schools and organisations complicate the implementation of well-being initiatives.



Proposed solutions

- **Safe spaces:** Develop accessible spaces for all, including those without mental health issues, and normalise their use. Encourage peer-to-peer support systems, create hotlines for support during holidays.
- **Education:** Introduce emotional education in schools, with opportunities for students to provide feedback. Create practical training and tools for youth workers to better handle crises, including a booklet tailored for young people.
- **Advocacy and awareness:** Launch large-scale awareness campaigns, including posters in public spaces and social media efforts. Advocate for adjustments in organisational structures/approaches and systemic reforms to prioritise mental health. Engage associations and networks to lead these efforts, ensuring sustained visibility and impact.

Questions for further reflection

- **What specific steps** should be taken within the next year to implement these ideas effectively? **How can** lobbying efforts for mental health and well-being in youth work be designed and scaled up? **What strategies** can address cultural and systemic differences in how mental health and well-being are perceived and discussed?



Working Group 3

Overcoming Barriers: Fostering More Inclusive, Accessible Youth Work

Youth work should be equally accessible to all, regardless of personal constitution, origin, parental income and previous success in the formal education system. Especially when it comes to international programmes, this diversity is not always ensured. How can barriers be recognised and paths be established to make youth work more accessible? What strategies are effective in promoting inclusion and diversity in youth work across different European contexts? How can organisations ensure they are accessible to young people from diverse backgrounds with different needs – and what do the youth work organisations and their staff need to be able to do that?

Facilitated by Amaya Diloy García, Social and Psychological Educationalist (Dipl.), Project Manager and pedagogical staff at Fundación Federico Ozanam (Zaragoza, Spain) | Input: Philipp Bryant, special needs pedagogue and lecturer for inclusive pedagogy at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences Bochum (Bochum, Germany)

Young people's statements

- "Embrace diversity, not prejudice."
- "Inclusion is the key."
- "All together!"

**MAKE
A
CHANGE**





Key takeaways

Having diverse youth voices in decision-making processes was recognised as essential for creating truly inclusive youth work and public spaces. **Representation at this level** would ensure that policies and initiatives reflect the experiences and needs of young people from all contexts and backgrounds, empowering them to actively shape the environments they live and evolve in. Moreover, **tackling bias and fostering awareness and open-mindedness** emerged as necessary for both youth workers and young people. Recognising personal biases and reflecting on them through self-awareness and targeted training could indeed help soften negative impacts and foster more equitable interactions.

The working group also underlined **cultural diversity as a strength**, advocating for inclusive settings and formats that celebrate differences and encourage dialogue between cultures. Non-verbal communication methods, such as in intercultural activities, were seen as particularly effective in building solidarity and mutual understanding. An **intersectional approach** was also recommended to reinforce inclusion. Tailoring youth work to account for diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds, practitioners can move beyond a 'one-size-fits-all' model and ensure that programmes are relevant and accessible to all young people. These combined efforts can lead to creating a youth work landscape that is both inclusive and empowering, recognising diversity as a foundation of its success.

Common challenges



- **Broad definitions of inclusion:** Participants noted that the term 'inclusion' often lacks clarity, leading to confusion and diverse interpretations in practice.
- **Structural and cultural barriers:** Public spaces and youth projects are often designed for specific groups, limiting accessibility and engagement. Furthermore, youth work is not always taken seriously by institutions, reducing its visibility and effectiveness.

- **Balancing structure and flexibility:** Meeting project requirements set by funding institutions and donors can sometimes conflict with the freedom needed to foster genuine inclusivity and creativity.



Proposed solutions

- Develop and implement **Youth Inclusion Guidelines** to support 'standard' inclusive practices in youth spaces.
- Launch a public awareness campaign titled '**Diversity is our strength**', showcasing youth perspectives through storytelling, social media, and public events.
- Secure **long-term funding** for youth work initiatives focusing on inclusion and diversity.
- Implement activities that promote **dialogue without language barriers**, such as intercultural exchanges, that foster dialogue and understanding even in non-verbal settings and formats.
- **Integrate youth voices** into the planning and design of public spaces to ensure representation and inclusivity.
- Provide **intersectionality training** for youth workers to help them address and navigate cultural and social differences effectively.

Questions for further reflection

- How can unengaged groups be effectively reached and included in youth work initiatives?
- What strategies can amplify youth voices and ensure they are respected by decision-makers?
- How can youth workers balance project obligations with fostering genuine inclusivity?



Working Group 4

Level Up: Strengthening Local Youth Work for European Cooperation

Impact research largely agrees that international youth projects generate lasting positive effects on young people's lives and social participation especially when they are integrated into stable local youth work structures. Nevertheless, many funding programmes do not reflect the importance of long-term viable local institutions. What steps need to be taken to secure local youth work as a sustainable basis? On this foundation, how can European cooperation between local youth projects be promoted to create new synergies?

Facilitated by Gianni Orsini, youth worker and consultant on sustainable development, international cooperation, conflict management, transformation and participation, Irènia – Jocs de Pau (La Nou de Berguedà, Barcelona, Spain) | Input: Judit Balogh, Coordinator of the European co-operation project Europe Goes Local, JINT vzw (Brussels, Belgium)



Young people's statements

- "Youth encounters are important, because building relationships with other young people is motivating, which leads to continuity."
- "International encounters are the seeds that we plant on the local level. To be able to do that we need to ensure that there is local soil where to plant that seed. Right now, many countries do not even recognise the term youth work. That has to change. To change this, a local youth work strategy has to be developed with young people."
- "It's also important to remember that our problems at the global level are similar to those on the local level; it only depends on your perspective. Therefore, we should all feel and assume co-responsibility towards our local, international and global village."



Key takeaways

Continuity and collaboration emerged as key pillars for effective youth work, with participants emphasising that maintaining project continuity is essential for achieving long-term objectives and fostering meaningful community impact. Local youth work and international projects were seen as mutually reinforcing, with international exchanges and encounters often acting as catalysts for inspiring innovative local initiatives. However, ensuring sustained youth engagement remains a challenge, requiring organisations to adapt their structures to be more appealing to younger generations. Increasing the availability of youth centres and using social media were highlighted as practical ways to encourage ongoing involvement.

Simplifying funding processes also appeared as a critical need, as the complexity of securing financial support creates significant barriers. Simplified application procedures, combined with training to support young people navigate these systems, were proposed as solutions.

Inclusion in youth work was another priority, with modern tools like AI recognised for their potential to make youth work more accessible, although some participants questioned the relevance of such technologies in local contexts.

The discussions also brought up several controversial topics. For example, while **advertising international projects** as travel opportunities generated a debate, many agreed that the values shared through participation could inspire more lasting engagement, even if some individuals disengage afterwards. **Intergenerational challenges** were also discussed, with contrasting views on whether older generations fail to listen to young people or vice versa.

Lastly, participants debated whether organisations should focus on adapting existing **local structures** to better suit young people or seek like-minded groups across broader geographical regions to create synergy. These discussions highlighted the complexity and diversity of opinions in addressing the challenges and opportunities in youth work.



Proposed solutions

- Establish a **network for youth workers**, stakeholders, and young people to improve communication and share resources.
- Advocate for a **European youth work strategy** that includes simplified and accessible funding programmes for local projects.
- Increase the number of **youth centres** to enhance visibility and engagement at the community level.
- Consider using tools like AI and Social Media to **improve inclusivity and outreach**.
- **Foster intergenerational understanding** by encouraging adults to adjust their approaches to better connect with young people.

Questions for further reflection

- How to hold authorities accountable for supporting youth work?
- How to sustain young people's involvement in local initiatives after international encounters?
- How to connect organisations with similar goals across Europe?
- How to enhance young people's trust in institutions and their interest in politics?



Working Group 5

Active Citizenship and Youth Activism: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Civic education to enable active citizenship is a declared goal of official European youth programmes. At the same time, young people committed to social, democratic and ecological issues are sometimes confronted with institutional barriers. The working group offers space for exchange between young activists and representatives from youth work, politics and administration: How can misunderstandings be avoided and actual conflicts of interest be dealt with productively? How can civic education help to prepare young people for these conflicts and contribute to productive solutions? What common goals do active young people and those who decide on the funding and structures of youth work have – and how can we achieve them?

Facilitated by Kasia Blasinska, IRSE – Fundacja Instytut Równowagi Społeczno-Ekonomicznej (Gdańsk, Poland) | Input: Maren Mitterer, Fridays for Future and co-organiser of the demonstration "Gemeinsam gegen Rechts" (Munich, Germany)

Young people's statements

- "The challenge for activists: being misunderstood."
- "We need more civic education in and outside of school."
- "You are not afraid of a possible lack of motivation if you are aware of the reasons why you start."
- "The feeling of belonging is the first step to active citizenship."





Key takeaways



Youth platforms, such as Generation Europe – The Academy play an important role in encouraging active citizenship by offering young people spaces to exchange ideas, collaborate, and take action on the issues they care about. Equally important are **safe spaces** where young people can openly share their thoughts, find support, and engage in activism without fear of judgment or misunderstanding. These environments are essential for fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment.

Civic education also stands out as a basis for active citizenship. Within and beyond the classroom, it must merge theoretical knowledge with practical experiences, such as civic projects and partnerships with youth centres, to engage young people. European programmes offer an invaluable opportunity, inspiring creativity and deepening resonance with issues in society. Along education, young people need chances to take on responsibilities, including in decision-making in political and institutional settings. Feeling respected and valued, regardless of their age, is crucial to maintaining active participation and long-term commitment.

Sustained dialogue between young people and political institutions is equally necessary, fostering a culture of mutual understanding. However, for these efforts to succeed, governments and legal systems must prioritise the recognition of youth work, reinforcing its critical role in enabling young people being active, engaged citizens and driving social change. By valuing and investing in youth work, society lays the groundwork for a more inclusive and democratic future.

Common challenges



- **Insufficient civic education:** Current civic education programmes in schools are seen as inadequate and fail to inspire young people to engage in active citizenship.

- **Lack of representation:** Young people often feel that their voices are undervalued or ignored in institutional settings.
- **Structural barriers:** Education systems lack the flexibility and safe spaces needed for youth engagement, and funding and institutional support for youth work remain limited.



Proposed solutions

- **Reform civic education curricula** to include practical experiences and address young people's expectations and needs.
- **Create and promote networks** and platforms for young people to share ideas at local, national, and European levels.
- **Establish more safe spaces** in educational institutions, supported by mental health resources and less rigid structures.
- **Provide training for young people** in project management and advocacy, enabling them to work with institutions and represent young people's interests effectively.
- **Institutionalise youth work**, ensuring that it receives adequate financial and legal support.
- **Encourage storytelling and campaigning** by dedicated advocates for civic education and democracy to inspire others.

Questions for further reflection

- **How should** civic education curricula be restructured, and what role should democracy education play? **How can** young people access institutional spaces and influence policy effectively? **What** concrete steps can be taken to ensure sustained dialogue between young people and institutions?

»Local youth work and its policy must be based on dialogue and co-created by young people, youth workers and policy makers.«

Judit Balogh

Europe Goes Local, Belgium



INSIGHTS AND MAIN MESSAGES

Youth Work At Its Limit is not a simple diagnosis; it is a plea for the urgent attention youth work deserves in Europe today. We are witnesses of the backbone of European democracy cracking under pressure. At local, regional, national and international levels, we can see numerous events, seminars, and projects where youth workers gather to voice, again and again, a probably uncomfortable truth: they are stretched beyond breaking, struggling to stay afloat, but are nevertheless expected to contribute to safeguarding society's foundations with limited resources and little recognition.

The bitter irony is that in an era when democracy itself feels fragile, we are letting a big part of its ground fall apart. Yet, in youth centres and organisations across Europe and beyond, youth work makes small victories happen that contribute to building tomorrow's Europe. This means that we ought to continue supporting and empowering youth workers and young people to create lasting change with adequate resources and a real safety net.

Hence, despite a rather unpleasant picture of the framework conditions for youth work today, the European Youth Work Symposium showed that successful youth work creates a kind of magical sphere in which young people can experience and develop their power to influence and reshape the world around them. The event offered a platform for stakeholders to share experiences, identify challenges, and propose solutions for strengthening youth work across Europe. Through working groups, discussions, and presentations, the Symposium highlighted key demands, practical outcomes, and actionable steps in areas where youth work can play a transformative role.

Youth work as a foundation for democracy

Youth work empowers young people to influence society and the communities in which they live, by advocating for change and personal as well as social transformation. The participants pointed out

that youth work plays an essential role to develop a critical mind and consciousness, a sense of belonging and cooperation – all important to safeguard democracy and democratic participation. If Europe does not continue to invest in youth work, it risks losing one of the most important supports and resources for participation and social cohesion.

Strengthening connections

The Symposium demonstrated that youth work benefits from the connection between local activities and international collaboration. It also presented practices such as inclusion and diversity campaigns, environmental and civic education projects to illustrate how local projects can generate ideas and initiatives for transnational cooperation. But for these actions to be effective, local youth work structures must be backed as the foundation for international impact.

Youth work and today's challenges

The challenges in youth work were a major topic throughout the Symposium. Participants discussed:

- **Funding:** Many organisations struggle with short-term or insufficient funding, which endangers their ability to continue implementing quality programmes and to keep the necessary staff. Sustainable, long-term funding is essential to secure the future of youth work.
- **Training and resources:** Participants stressed the need for training programmes and learning opportunities to equip youth workers with necessary competencies, including tools for emotional education, inclusion, and advocacy.
- **Recognition of youth work:** In many countries, youth work is still not fully recognised as a profession, making it harder to secure resources or advocate for its relevance and contribution to social development.

- **Burnout among youth workers:** Heavy workloads, emotional stress, and limited support systems risk driving more and more youth work professionals out of the field.
- **Barriers to participation:** structural and cultural barriers limit the accessibility of youth work for young people from diverse or marginalised backgrounds. Tailored initiatives that reflect the needs of diverse young people can support addressing those barriers and making youth work more accessible.
- **Strengthening networks:** Building alliances at local, national, and European levels can support collaboration and amplify the voice of youth workers and young people.

The importance of young people's voices – going beyond the rhetoric

The inclusion of young people in the discussions was a key aspect of the Symposium. During the Youth Day, the participants prepared themselves to engage on equal footing with policymakers and other youth work experts. This implemented the principle “nothing about us without us” in practice, confirming that youth policies and programmes must reflect the voices and experiences of the young people they are meant to support.

A shared commitment to the future

In the closing sessions, participants and speakers highlighted the need to continue building bridges between young people, youth work professionals, and decision-makers. The Symposium reinforced that youth work plays a critical role in promoting active citizenship, inclusion and diversity, and addressing challenges in society. To achieve this, sustained funding, better recognition, and stronger collaboration are vital.

The Symposium concluded with a call to action: to prioritise youth work as a key driver of democratic and inclusive societies, and to ensure that the voices of young people and youth workers contribute to shaping decisions that affect their lives and futures.

Bildungs- und Begegnungswerk



APPENDIX

OPENING SPEECH

by Jocelyne Jakob, Managing Director of IBB e.V.

Good morning! On behalf of the IBB board and the entire team, I would like to give you all a big welcome. We are thrilled that so many young people and professionals from 14 European countries have found their way to Dortmund.

We warmly welcome the representatives of our funders Stiftung Mercator, the state of North Rhine–Westphalia, the National Agency for Erasmus+, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and the European Cultural Foundation, as well as representatives from academia, politics and administration from across Europe. Thank you for taking the time and making the journey to discuss the importance of youth work for a democratic Europe!

For almost 40 years now, we as IBB are working on overcoming boundaries, by offering opportunities for young people and adults to connect and learn from each other. IBB is the German abbreviation for 'International Association for Education and Exchange'. As a Dortmund-based NGO, we are happy to work with partners and active networks throughout Europe. Our aim has always been to bring people together, to let them share different perspectives and to enable more participation. In other words, we are working on strengthening and further developing civil society in Europe – locally and across all borders.

To serve this purpose, 15 years ago we came up with the concept for a new type of network of European youth organisations. In this network, always three organisations from three different countries should work closely together, to connect and empower young people who would not normally be reached by international youth work programmes. Instead of just funding short-term encounters, we embedded their

international workcamp experiences into a three-year process of co-operation, training and exchange – offering both the young people and also the youth work organisations opportunities to grow and evolve.

Over the past 15 years, this network, which started under the name ewoca³ – European Workcamps, has also grown and evolved. And we, as IBB, did the same. In 2018, together with our partners, we expanded the workcamp-centred ewoca³ approach to a network and funding programme that is clearly focusing on Active Citizenship Education – now called ‘Generation Europe’.

Why did we do that? Because the hands-on experience of our network partners confirmed what has also been verified by academic research, such as the German Access Study on international youth exchange: If we want to reach all young people, if we want to make international youth work sustainably successful, it cannot stand on its own. Long-term local work is essential for that.

That is why the Generation Europe approach is based on three pillars: firstly, enabling local projects by allowing young people to form local groups; secondly, let them connect and support each other through international exchange; and thirdly, strengthen the youth organisations that make this work possible through training and professional development.

So before I continue, let me first say thank you to all of you, who are active in this network. With your huge commitment, you are proving that this concept is working. We are proud and grateful to work with all of you!

As a network of currently more than 40 European youth organisations, we strongly support the goals of the European Youth Work Agenda, that is aiming in the very same direction. And we are working to maintain and use the combination of these three pillars – local work, international exchange, and strengthening youth work by training and professional development – in future programmes as well.

However – and this must be stated clearly here: This great network of European youth cooperation also is a unicorn. It has been made possible not only by the hard work of motivated young people and youth workers all over Europe, but also by coincidences of coming together with the interest of funders, above all Stiftung Mercator. This also means that we have to fight for money again and again, for each phase of the programme, in order to be able to pay not only for the projects themselves, but also for the staff, that is absolutely necessary to continuously support and develop such a large and diverse network.

Institutional funding that sustainably secures this kind of youth work, beyond short-term funding for individual projects, is few and far between in Germany. And the situation is no different in the rest of Europe. If you want to hear more about this, ask my highly qualified colleagues here in the room, each of them can tell you more.

When I see the work of the local groups within Generation Europe – The Academy, I am thrilled, grateful and also a little proud to be part of this process. In these groups, young people find the space to develop their own opinions, ask questions and identify problems. Youth leaders provide them with the tools they need to stand up for themselves and their issues. By this they start to shape their communities and their environment at the local level. They are truly active citizens and committed members of civil society.

During their annual trinational youth encounters, they exchange views on the challenges they are facing, find common ground and learn about different perspectives. By working together, they organise everything that people need to find their way in our diverse European society and help to shape it.

It was German sociologist Oskar Negt, that once said: “Democracy is the only form of government that must be learned.” I would like to add: It is not primarily about learning everlasting truths that have been formulated once. Once established social values and also hard-won human rights are repeatedly called into question. That’s why they must

be defended, and civil society must be continually redesigned by each generation to preserve them.

To participate, we must not only understand how our democratic institutions work. Actually, we need a whole toolbox to consolidate opinions, to discuss and advocate for interests. In the network of Generation Europe – The Academy, we learn all of this together – sometimes even without realising it. Because international youth work is able to do all this, it has a special role in the current political situation in Europe – and a special responsibility. But youth leaders and project managers need support, knowledge transfer, methods and resources to fulfil their important tasks. They will not be able to do so, if they are left alone.

Promoting democracy also involves dialogue with active politicians. Unfortunately, this step – a serious exchange between policymakers, youth workers and young people – is skipped far too often. Together, we want to change that, and that is also a reason we are here today.

When we met here in the Dortmunder U one year ago, for our previous Symposium “Youth Work in Europe – Mission (Im)possible?”, one of our youth leaders, that is now also a member of the IBB team, summarised his impression of the event with the question: ‘Is youth work a fragile, endangered working field – or a mighty dragon rising to save the future?’ In my opinion, both is true: Youth work in Europe – local and international – suffers from high workloads, difficult framework conditions and insufficient financial resources. At the same time, youth work has so much to offer for our democratic societies. But some things need to change if youth work should continue to fulfil this role in the future. Today, we will be discussing what exactly needs to change, and how we can build bridges and break barriers to make this possible.

On this day of exchange, we will also learn what the local youth groups and the organisations that support them have achieved, despite the difficult conditions. Let’s listen to their stories, as they are all experts on their own behalf. And let’s discuss with them how they imagine the future – including for youth work in Europe.

And tonight, when you go home after an exciting day of exchange, imagine what we, what youth work in Europe, could achieve for a democratic Europe with a sufficient and sustainable financial basis. When youth centres are open, youth leaders have adequate funds for projects, and all young people can find a place that suits their needs and interests.

Youth workers in Europe are ready for it. Young people are ready for it. So let's build this foundation together! Great to have you all here, I am curious to hear your ideas about all of that – thank you!





KEYNOTE SPEECH

*by Katia Henrikh, youth worker and project manager
from Chernivtsi, Ukraine*

I am in the classroom at school. The clock is ruthlessly ticking, and I realise that I have less than 30 seconds to finish the maths test. I grab the paper with my test answers, my hands wet and shaky as I approach the teacher's desk. I place it on her table, and the teacher takes a red pen and starts checking my answers. She marks the first wrong answer on my test, then the second, and the third. After the fifth one, I imagine my parents yelling at me at home. After the sixth, I start thinking that I am the dumbest person in the class.

Finally, when almost the entire paper is covered in red circles, the teacher says, "65 points. It's a 5. And you don't deserve more." But it was actually a relatively polite comment from her, compared to other things she had said to me: "retarded," "slow," "lazy." And in those few moments when I wanted to stand up for myself, she called me "rude."

For your information, I wasn't actually that bad at maths, and my real grade was a "2." But my teacher's constant insistence that I wasn't good enough made me believe that maybe I wasn't – in maths, or as a person in general. Back then, in Ukraine, we didn't have the word "bullying." And even if we did, we would never use it in reference to a teacher. No one could be bullied by a teacher – that's nonsense! It's a pedagogical approach; they just want us to improve. My story with the maths teacher ended with me in therapy for a year, taking medication, and doing breathing exercises after every maths class. It helped me realise how much the formal education system needs improvement. And once upon a time, I discovered the magical world of youth work.

I was 18 when I travelled to my very first youth exchange in Germany. I was super shy and extremely suspicious about the whole thing. What do you mean you'll cover my expenses for travel, accommodation, and meals? Honestly, my father was convinced the project was either a scam or a cult, and I would end up in human trafficking or have my kidneys sold.



Instead, I found myself surrounded by a group of super nice, confident, open-minded, and passionate people who were nothing like me or anyone I knew before. They all seemed like the characters from popular American teen movies, and I couldn't believe I could belong there.

We visited museums, went to the state parliament, and had discussions about politics. I also remember talking to my youth leader, Ivan, on the last day about his life path and why he was involved in youth work. In the end, he said, "Katia, let's do more projects together, it was so nice!"

As I was driving home, I was certain of three things: Obviously, I wanted to go on another youth exchange. Secondly, I wanted to be like Ivan and help other people. And thirdly, I was so grateful for this experience that I wanted to "change something" in the world for the better.

It felt like a dream, but reality hit hard. At university, I once again faced all the downsides of formal education. My hobby became collecting the golden quotes from my professors that could crush any ambition, critical thinking, or sense of individuality. Let me share some with you:

"You're not here to debate, you're here to learn."

“If it’s not in the textbook, it’s not relevant.”

And number three, my personal favourite:

“Do you think you’re the smartest one here?”

I was moving along my life path, carrying these inner critics with me. The older I got, the less power they had over me. At the youth exchanges, I met many wonderful people and made friends; I became more confident and open. Yet, coming back home after every camp felt like waking up from a beautiful dream. It felt wrong that I only lived the life I wanted during these projects.

And then, as if by some mystery of the universe, while wrestling with these doubts and questions, I received a job offer I couldn’t refuse. The NGO that coordinated the projects I had participated in was looking for a youth leader because the previous one was planning to move abroad. The project was a continuation of the program I had been a part of as a participant. It was a big deal, involving 14 partnerships and 42 youth associations from different European countries. It was a five-year commitment, with three youth encounters and local work with the group. Their motto was something like: “Act local – connect European – think global.” I bet some of you have heard of this program, right?

As a famous philosopher once said: “If someone invites you to work for Generation Europe – The Academy, you must say yes.” So, I started working as a youth leader for my organisation, though it felt like jumping into the unknown. I had no idea what I actually agreed to, my English was poor, and the maths teacher inside me kept telling me I didn’t deserve this experience because I wasn’t competent enough. But I turned down a little bit the volume on those self-doubts and enrolled in English courses.

When I first met my local group, I was overwhelmed by the realisation that I was now responsible for them. They were there, waiting for me to lead, and I wasn’t sure if I was the right person to do it. But my

colleagues were incredibly supportive throughout the entire process, helping me take small steps forward. I often looked up to the more experienced trainers, trying to copy their style. After every activity I facilitated, I would bombard them with questions about how I could improve. I failed many times, but with every youth encounter, meeting, and training I participated in, I learned something – and I still do. And now, after four years of challenges and growth, here I am, standing on the stage of a European youth work symposium, living proof that everything is possible if you don't betray your dream.

My story is definitely not unique, and I know some of you in this room have gone through the same. The stories of my life could have remained stories without a happy ending, but I made the decision to change that. In our field, we often face limitations, rejection, and injustice. People love to tell us what we can't do, but we drink one more cup of coffee and keep going, right?

For many project managers and youth leaders here, youth work is more like an "unpaid hobby" that we do alongside our "main job." Please raise your hand if you've ever had to explain that coordinating a youth exchange in Italy with 30 teenagers is not the same as having a vacation in Italy. Raise your hand if you've ever answered a phone call from one of your participants on a Sunday evening because they were having trouble. And raise your hand if feeling constantly tired has become your normal condition.

Here's some interesting data for you. It's a comparison of different modern professions, the amount of work and the payment. I'm sure it's no surprise to us that youth workers are underpaid, but perhaps not everyone knows just how the differences to other professions are in detail: If you are lucky and living in the right country, as a trained fulltime specialist in our field, at the very end of your career you may earn just about the starting salary of other sectors. And that only applies if you are not one of the many precarious and freelance workers in the youth work sector, for whom things are often even much worse.

Profession	Average Gross Salary (Annual)	Average Working Hours	Notes
Youth Workers	€ 20,000 – € 35,000	40 – 45+ hours per week	Often unpaid overtime, underfunding is a major issue.
IT Professionals	€ 45,000 – € 80,000	40 – 45 hours per week	High demand, even higher salaries in Western Europe.
School Teachers	€ 30,000 – € 60,000	40 – 60+ hours per week	Overwork includes lesson planning, grading, and meetings.
Sales	€ 30,000 – € 70,000 + bonus	40 – 50 hours per week	Performance-based pay, commission-driven.
Engineers	€ 35,000 – € 100,000	40+ hours per week	Even higher salaries in tech and manufacturing industries.

Typical salary ranges 2020–2023, EU (incl. UK). Sources: Eurostat, glassdoor.de, payscale.com, salaryexpert.com, forbes.com, World Population Review.

Let me tell you a story about Maria, a youth worker from Portugal. She was an excellent professional, working as a project coordinator for an NGO in a small town near Porto. Maria was a mix of creativity, humour, and great ideas. Youngsters loved her, and it was clear that she loved them back. Maria was happily married with two kids. In her past, she had also played in theatre and had a very artistic personality.

You might ask: “So what’s the problem?” The problem was that, aside from her job, Maria didn’t have much of a life. Her husband couldn’t understand why the fourth work trip of the month was “mandatory,” and her children needed their mother. So Maria started setting more boundaries at work. She stopped saying “yes” to Zoom meetings after 6 p.m. and reduced her involvement with the NGO, delegating more tasks to younger professionals. But this led to frustration because the job she truly wanted to do – working directly with young people – was poorly paid, and she had to shift entirely into a management role. She became distant, spending her days on accounting and reports, rarely interacting with her youth participants.

One morning, she woke up and realized she was burned out. After 20 years in the field, Maria quit youth work. Now, she works a regular nine-to-six office job, with weekends off and a decent salary. She has more time for her family, friends, and artistic hobbies. Youth work has become a fond memory she occasionally recalls.

This is a fictional story, but I'm sure many of us have known a colleague like Maria – a passionate and dedicated professional who eventually burned out and left the field. And this is just one of the many challenges we face.

Throughout its history, youth work has always been a response to the social, educational, and economic needs of young people, but it's never isolated from the broader challenges facing society. You can't simply create a bubble and detach from global problems, especially when working with young people who have fewer opportunities. Civic engagement naturally becomes part of your worldview, as youth work becomes a way to contribute to justice and equality in society.

Unfortunately, alongside our struggles, some of us – whether social workers, civic activists, or educators – face even greater challenges than underfunding and inadequate working conditions.

This is **Giulio Regeni** from Italy, who was tortured and killed by Egyptian authorities for investigating the illegal conditions of young workers in Cairo.



Next one, **Natalia Estemirova**, social activist, project coordinator at the human rights NGO Memorial in Russia, found shot dead, apparently for her investigations about Chechen war crimes.



Natalia Estemirova, painted posthumously by the Chechen artist Asia Oumarova. (Photo: Asia Oumarova, commons.wikimedia.org , CC BY-SA 4.0)

Marielle Franco, a Brazilian politician and human rights defender who fought for the rights of the poor, women, and LGBTQ+ communities. She mentored young activists and was involved in youth programs in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Was assassinated in March 2018.



This list could go on. What disturbs me even more is that these people died in the 21st century – not long ago, in what we consider a modern, humanistic world. All of them were working to empower, support, and highlight the issues of those whose voices are often not heard, just as we do in youth work. But it seems that freedom, human rights and other democratic values are under threat today more than ever. War, conflicts, inflation, climate change, humanitarian crises, the rise of

authoritarian ideas: We've become accustomed to bad news, and it's so easy to feel hopeless. But I want to ask you: Is this the world we want to pass on to younger generations?

The crises we face will only grow and evolve if we don't start acting now. And it's not easy, it will be hard and challenging, and it also feels impossible. But look at this room and around you. We're not alone, and together we have a chance.

Planting Seeds of Kindness

Let me introduce you **Roman**. He's one of the youngsters I've had the pleasure of meeting in my life.



Roman is 19 and lives in a small town in western Ukraine. We've been together on several youth tent camps, and he was always the one saving bugs, spiders, and any other living creatures. If he saw someone snapping a tree branch – like boys sometimes do during games – he'd step in and say: "Please stop! Why are you hurting the plant?" Deeply concerned with ecological issues, Roman decided to do something for his town. He bought several tree seedlings and planted them in the local park. The next day, he went to check on them, only to find that all the seedlings had been broken – someone had destroyed them for fun during the night. Frustrated but determined, Roman returned to the market, bought more seedlings, and planted them again in the same spot. But the following day, he found them destroyed once more. His level of disappointment was beyond words. These trees had harmed no one, and it was clear that someone was deliberately sabotaging his efforts without any rational reason.

Still, Roman didn't give up. The following weekend, he went back to the market, bought yet another batch of trees, and planted them in the same place. The next morning, he prepared himself to see the trees broken again. But to his surprise, all of the seedlings were still there. Even more surprising, he saw a woman nearby who had placed sticks around the young trees to protect them. They started talking, and Roman learned that she had been watching him struggle and decided to help.

I'm telling you about Roman today because I've realized that when I grow up, I want to be like him. I want to have that kind of inner strength and attitude that doesn't give negativity a chance. I want to be able to plant the seeds of love and kindness all over the world and stand ready to protect them from those who destroy things for fun. I want to connect people around causes that matter to me and, despite the obstacles, keep doing the right thing.

I've shared many stories with you today, but this room is filled with stories of its own. We have researchers, artists, politicians, youth leaders, students, and project managers. We also have those who stood up for

others, who would not accept injustice, and who raised their voices for change. These are the individuals who dared to reach the goals that seemed impossible to achieve.

Today, we have the opportunity to collaborate and contribute to meaningful actions. We can build bridges across countries, generations, and backgrounds to connect our ideas and share our perspectives. We have the chance to break down the barriers of misunderstanding and division. So let's take this opportunity for a better world – for future generations and for our own dreams.

Our voices are powerful. You are powerful. Thank you.



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.



Listen to the real experts! Consultations on youth work and youth policy all too often take place without those who are affected most by the results: the young people themselves. The European Youth Work Symposium aims to be different, as young people are experts on their own behalf. But how can they discuss pressing issues on equal terms with representatives from politics, academia and administration – some of whom have decades of experience? For this, an international team of youth work professionals developed the concept of a special training and preparation day for the young activists. This is their story. ■ youtu.be/TQ57HBIjOoc

Why we have to save youth work: In many European countries, democracy is under pressure as authoritarian ideas gain strength. While the importance of youth work is increasing, especially for those who are particularly affected by unequal opportunities, the working field is confronted with major challenges. ■ youtu.be/Tz-eccCHgt0



