# Youth Workers Associations: the state of play

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# Table of Contents


Introduction 3

1. What do we already know about youth workers associations and are they communities of practice? 4

2. Methodology 7

3. Findings 9

3.1. Youth Workers Associations 9

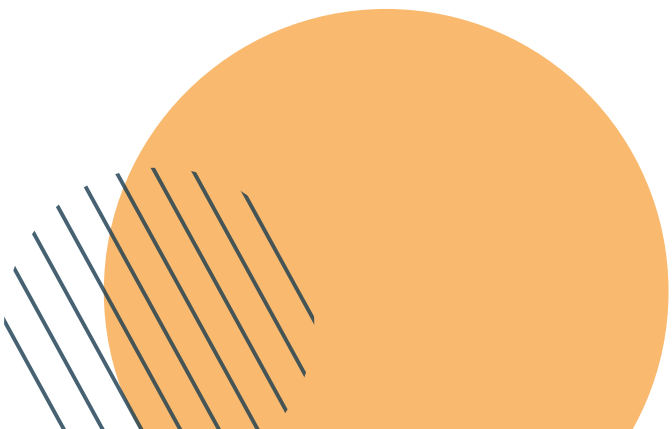
3.2. Goals, challenges and everyday work 11

3.3. Cooperation. European dimension 16

4. Discussion 19

5. Conclusions 21

References 22

# Introduction

This research is part of Erasmus+ K2 project 'European youth workers unite to empower youth and youth field– Youth worker is a lifestyle'. The background of the project was described as follows: it is crucial for youth work and youth work policy development to have a strong voice of youth workers on all levels of governance. Development of the quality of youth work as well as encouraging better recognition of the field, clearer political commitment, and stronger links with stakeholders and researchers are essential for the existence of youth work. During the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, participating youth workers from EU and COE member states, and other stakeholders strongly recognized the need for an international network of youth workers, to give youth workers a voice, support peer learning and quality development in the youth field across Europe. The final declaration of the convention calls to action – establish a European Network of Youth Workers Associations. To support the fulfillment of this objective 12 organisations agreed on a memorandum to set steps towards a European Youth Workers Association.

Some of these steps are taken through this research and results are presented in this report. We needed to map the realities of youth workers associations and find out what they work for and how they work. We also needed to know what are the expectations towards the European umbrella organisation.

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# 1. What do we already know about youth workers associations and are they communities of practice?

There is not a lot of information available about youth workers associations in Europe. Tomi Kiilakoski has mapped organisations either uniting youth workers or organisations promoting cooperation between different youth work institutes. This picture in itself is promising as many countries have some sort of representation in one category or another. Kiilakoski has also analysed important components of strong practice architecture, basing his analysis mainly on the theoretical approach of Kemmis (2009, 2014), where he states that our 'sayings' - how we formulate or talk about youth work or how it is recognised is one of the components. The second one concerns 'doings' and occupational dimension: how youth work education and sustainable careers of youth workers are supported. The third one is about 'realtings' - how youth work structures are formed and how youth work is organised in relation to the public and other professions. Based on the analysis, European countries are divided into the four clusters of practice architecture regarding youth work: countries with strong youth work; countries with well developed but in need of some development of youth work; countries where there are some examples of development of youth work and countries in need of development of youth work. In the first two clusters youth work associations exist and in the third and fourth cluster they exist in some cases, which indicates the importance of the associations. (Kiilakoski, 2018) It is also important to note that in this project there are countries from each four clusters.

There is another recently conducted research available about youth workers associations and youth work ethics in Iceland, Estonia and Australia. The research showed that mostly youth workers in these countries felt that they were connected to the youth work sector (n=247, 71.4%) and approximately one third were members of a professional association. Youth workers highlighted the need for professional associations to promote the exchange of resources and information amongst the workforce (n=256, 74.0%) and provide professional development and training opportunities (n=253, 73.1%). However, youth workers also expected associations to do advocacy work for peak bodies and government (n=236, 68,2%) and advocacy for the working conditions and salary (n=218, 61,8%). Networking was also important (n=219, 65,3%) and media responses in the matters of youth work as well (n=157, 45,4%). The more work experience youth workers had, the more they were involved in the professional association. (Corney et al 2020) This research shows that expectations of youth workers are connected with professional development but also with lobbying for the profession and its' recognition.

On the European youth policy level there are also expectations towards the 'community of practice' of youth workers. First of all, the youth workers community of practice is diverse

including both paid and volunteer youth workers, who might have rather different training and educational pathways. A coordinated approach of youth work education and training is therefore stressed in the policy documents to assure competence, ongoing learning and knowledgeability of youth workers. Cooperation, innovation and evidence-based approach within the youth work community of practice are strongly encouraged together with better understanding of the framework and concepts of youth work. It is expected that youth workers would be knowledgeable and aware: context-aware, knowledge-aware, professionally self-aware practitioners. (Rannala, Stojanovic, Kovacic 2021)

The '**community of practice**' refers to people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain. In addition to the 'domain' also 'community' and 'practice' are important in this concept:

1. **the domain:** membership means a commitment to the domain, and therefore there is a commitment to a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. The domain is not necessarily something recognized as "expertise" outside the community. Domains can be specific professions or include multiple professions or roles. There may also be distinct areas within a profession that are better served by different communities able to focus on shared issues of practice.;

2. **the community:** to achieve what is their interest in the shared domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. When the domain is a profession, members will mostly be practitioners of this profession. When it is an issue, it is a matter of gathering the relevant voices. It is better to leave the question open for each community to decide who should be involved. Because a community of practice depends on commitment, leadership, and initiative of its members, communities of practice work best when participation is volunteer - encouraged rather than mandated;

3. **the practice:** members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems. Community develops a sense of "ownership" of this area of capability.

(Wenger -Trayner, E; Wenger-Trayner, B 2015; Wenger-Trayner, E; Wenger-Trayner, B 2023)

All three elements – a domain, a community, and a practice – are always present, but the forms, formalization, (geographical) locations, recognition and visibility, sizes etc. of communities may vary. 'A growing number of associations, professional and otherwise, are seeking ways to focus on learning through reflection on practice. Their members are restless and their allegiance is fragile. They need to offer high-value learning activities. The peer-to-peer learning activities typical of communities of practice offer a complementary alternative to more traditional course offerings and

publications'. (ibid.,) According to this, youth workers associations can be viewed as communities of practice.

Communities of practice may face different developmental challenges during different stages.

| Phase | Theme | Domain | Community | Practice |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Potential | Discovering common ground | Seeing your real passion as a worthy domain | Finding enough potential members to imagine a community | Recognizing shared struggles and potential help |
| Coalescing | Finding value | Discovering how others experience the domain and what they need to learn | Getting to know each other | Helping each other, sharing stories and tips, solving problems |
| Establishing | Getting organized | Neqotiating a shared learning agenda | Establishing a rhythm and a way of working, building relationships and trust | Finding activities that create the most learning value |
| Committing | Building an identity | Establishing the value of the domain in the world | Expanding the membership to include all concerned | Developing and pushing a communal regime of competence |
| Evolving | Taking stewardship | Achieving influence and recognition as the steward of the domain | Balancing intimacy and openness; welcoming newcomers | Renewing relevance: establishing standards, seeking innovations; advancing the practice to be world-class |
| Dispersing | Moving on | Responding to new circumstances | Keeping in touch | Leaving a legacy |

**Figure 1.** Developmental challenges of typical of the evolution of communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner, E; Wenger-Trayner, B 2023)

Youth workers associations participating in this research have mostly gone through the first three developmental stages: discovering common ground, finding value and getting organised.

# 2. Methodology

This study aimed to describe and understand the state of play of associations of youth workers in Europe.

Research questions:

1. To map information about youth workers associations in Europe.

2. To describe and understand how youth workers associations work: goals, strategies, expectations, challenges, success stories, every day work.

3. To analyse the needs of youth workers associations (participating in the project), including the needs for cooperation on European level.

To answer these research questions 7 focus group interviews and in the case of Italy 10 individual interviews with the leaders and/or active members of the youth workers association (or other similar organisation) were carried out in each of the project countries. Each project country had a researcher in the team. Researchers met twice online to discuss the instrument of data collection (see appendix 1) and research process. Further cooperation between researchers was in the format of e-consultations and collaboration in the Google Drive documents. Interviews were carried out by country researchers between September 2022 and March 2023. Interview language was English.

| Country | Participants in the FG interview | Length of the FG interview |
|---|---|---|
| Czech | 7 | 90 minutes |
| Estonia | 3 | 70 minutes |
| Greece | 3 | 75 minutes |
| Italy | 10 | 90 to 120 minutes per each interviewed youth worker |
| Malta | 9 | 60 minutes |
| Netherlands | 5 | 90 minutes |
| North-Macedonia | 5 | 90 minutes |
| Portugal | 6 | 120 minutes |

**Table 1.** Interviews information per country

Suggested steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were followed. Interviews were transcribed and coded by the country researchers (with two exceptions where coding was done by the lead partner researchers) and codes with extracts were collected in the shared document. The lead partner (Estonia) researchers looked for the repeated codes and collated those into the main themes. Emerged themes were checked in relation to both the coded extracts and the full data-set. The nature of each individual theme, and the relationship between the themes were identified. Themes were named as shown on figure 2.

The main theme 'professional development and identity of youth workers' also includes the general concern for the identity and clarity of youth work itself and is of course connected with the need to do more 'advocacy and lobbying' towards wider 'recognition' of youth work.

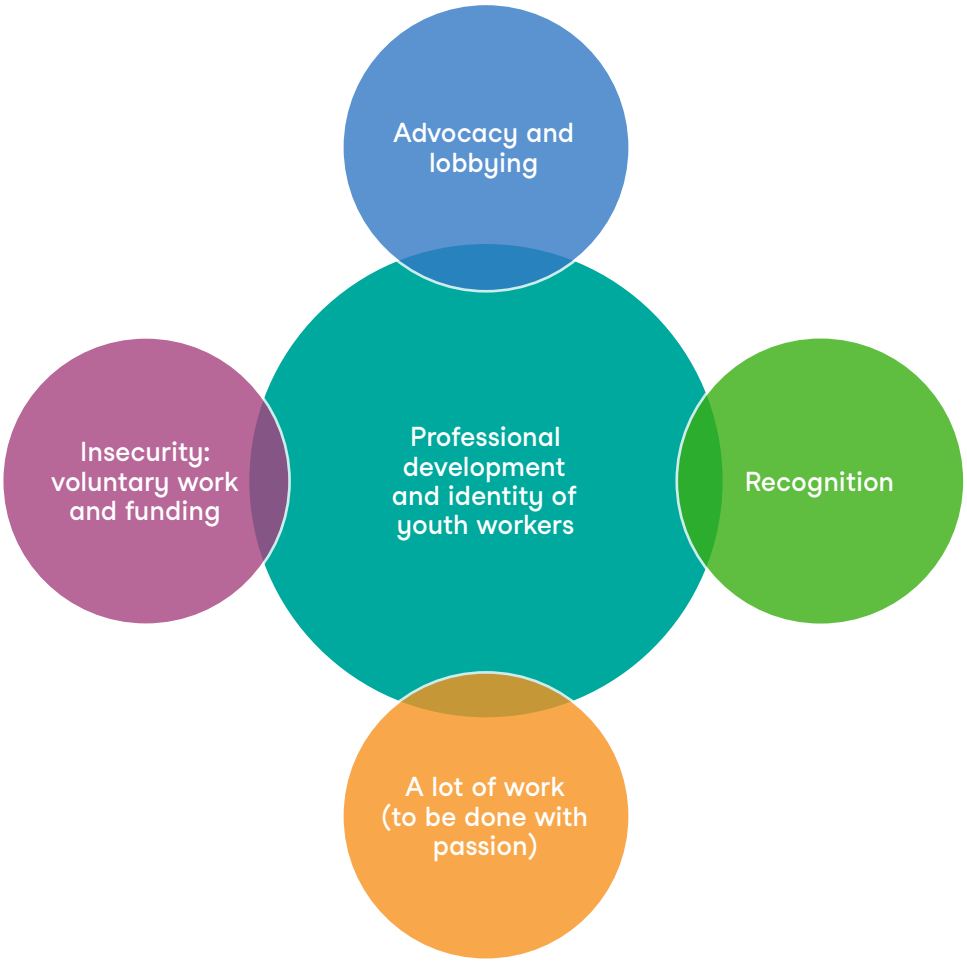


**Figure 2.** Themes

Themes 'insecurity: voluntary work and funding' and 'a lot of work (to be done with passion)' describe the realities of youth workers association – both the challenges which need to be overcome, but also their achievements and motivation and different work and agenda they have. Communication was mentioned across all themes, but we introduce it separately.

# 3. Findings

Findings are presented in order to answer three research questions through the themes which emerged. First the facts about youth workers associations involved in the research are presented and their main everyday realities.Then the main goals, challenges, achievements and processes are described. Finally a closer look on cooperation on European level is taken.

## 3.1. Youth Workers Associations

In the results we will refer to the youth workers associations who participated in this research, but it has to be clear that in some cases there was a different approach, as there was no specific youth workers organisation in the country, but instead umbrella organisation uniting other youth work organisations or also youth organisations.

For the detailed information about the associations who participated in this study please look at table 2.

| Country | Juridical status of the organization | Was estab-lished in: | Represents/unites (whom: physical or juridical bodies) | Number of members | Employed personnel |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Czech | NGO | 1998 | Other organisations | 106 | 16 |
| Estonia | NGO | 1999 | Youth workers | 350 | 4 |
| Greece | NGO | 2017 | Youth workers | 54 | 0 |
| Italy | NGO | 2020 | Board Members and youth workers | 52 | 6 |
| Netherlands | NGO | 2004 | Child and youth workers | 50 | 0 |
| North-Macedonia | NGO | 2013 | Other organisations | 17 | 2 |
| Malta | NGO | 1998 | Youth workers | 49 | 0 |
| Portugal | NGO | 2019 | Youth workers | 71 | 0 |

**Table 2.** Youth workers associations profiles.

A common challenge of youth workers associations is, for example, problems with funding.

In some interviews fees for the members were mentioned (from 12 to 24 € per year for the youth workers). But mostly **funding** was described as unstable and the associated **organisational uncertainty** was perceived. This might be also the reason for overworking, some fragmentation of the work and slower achievement of the main goals. Strengthening the organisation takes time and other resources.

> *Czech: …For the chaos we've grown out of, the disagreements are gone.*

> *Portugal: We are very proud of what we were able to achieve in the past few years, even with very limited resources and funds. We manage to build a strong community of youth workers /…/ We believe our whole approach is to reach positive results in a short period of time, but ultimately, we hope to achieve more and more, we are at this point focusing on continuity to develop our organization to reach a higher level. Although we are a recent organization, we were able to question and move forward the national process on youth work contributing with improvements in this sector as key partners to main national entities.*

> *Estonia: …since our organisation first got the status as a strategic partner to the ministry in 2019, our organisation has been able to grow and get stronger because there has been this secure income to be able to employ people full-time and make sure that we have this continuity and sustainability that we can keep going. Because before it was more like project based. /…/But now with this strategic partnership, it means that we can rent the office and employ people to work either part-time or full-time, but for a longer period and don't have to worry that we have to keep finding new people or we have to employ people who do a main job somewhere else. And then as a side job, they do a little bit for our organisation. I think that's helped us to grow. I think another thing what we've maybe done in the last four years is that our membership has been growing steadily.*

Youth Workers associations who participated in this research mainly work on **voluntary** bases or have a few paid staff members, sometimes only for the certain period of time when project funding allows. Most organisations emphasize that they have established good relationships with either leading ministry or other national body responsible for the youth field (which is also essential for lobbying and advocacy, which will be discussed below). Also there are other partners and beneficial cooperation mentioned within the youth field and wider: with other ministries, local municipalities, youth councils, research institutions, schools, private companies etc. All interviewees mention benefiting from **Erasmus+ possibilities**.

> *North-Macedonia: Erasmus+ is the main source of funding, but the Agency for Youth and Sport is one of the key stakeholders supporting the process for recognition of youth work.*

*Netherlands: The board consists of a daily board (chairman, treasurer and secretary). In addition, the chairmen of the various working groups are members of the general board. The workgroups include workgroup children's work, workgroup girls work, workgroup abroad; working group publicity and social media.*

Thematic working group as a working format is used within organisations in some cases. In some cases (smaller or newer associations) meetings only couple of times a year were mentioned. Depending on the funding, size and needs of the association they either rent or share the office or try to work mostly online.

**Communication and information**. Communication channels vary from traditional websites, mailing lists and social media to the printed magazines and news portals. Direct communication is also valued. Communication ways depend on the size of the organisation and perhaps on the shorter and longer histories.

*North-Macedonia: Website, Facebook and Instagram are the most important for communication, as well as email updates. Direct communication as well when going to the meetings.*

*Czech: We have a regular mailing, nowadays we even added another mailing, one is more organisational, one is more linking to events of organisations that want to invite others. We still have a printed magazine, it goes to the political representation, to mayors, senators, deputies etc. We have a news portal /…/, where we try to report on what's happening in the area and link to it. Then we have the Council's website, which is more information about the organisation and the projects we are implementing.*

Information shared with the members was mainly about training, cooperation, support and project possibilities, but also with the aim of involving members into the lobbying and decision making on local and national level. Communication channels were in some cases also described as the means of lobbying.

## 3.2. Goals, challenges and everyday work

The main goal of youth worker's associations in the project countries is **to support the professional development and identity of youth workers**. When translated into the activities, it is about sharing important information with youth workers, offering trainings, supervision, coaching, practice exchange and carrying out projects aiming mainly to support cooperation and professional growth of youth workers and development of quality of youth work. The goals and activities of the associations are also strongly connected with the ultimate wish of wider **recognition of youth work**.

The main stated goals of supporting professional development and identity of youth workers are interrelated with the circumstances of the countries regarding youth policy and youth work. In

countries where youth policy and youth work framework is weak or missing, there were more mentions of the problem with defining identity of youth workers. In countries with a stronger youth policy and youth work framework, including laws, development plans, quality standards and educational opportunities, there was a greater emphasis on further training, professional development agenda in general and networking possibilities for youth workers, inclusion of youth workers in different influential processes and supporting their agency. But regarding the framework – theoretical and methodological gap or the 'messy' discourse describing the essence of youth work were also seen problematic.

| | |
|---|---|
| Czech | *Strengthening participation in general. So that every organisation has the opportunity, or every member in the organisation through the organisation and the financial roof has the opportunity to get involved, to comment on something or to raise an opinion on a matter in which they feel called. So increasing the level of participation. And those organizations will want us to continue to work with that company in a communicative way.* |
| Estonia | *The main goal of our organization is to support youth workers in their professional development./---/ that they really feel that this is their organization, that they will stay here, and that more and more members will choose something for the organization: that they are not only members, but they are active members.* |
| Greece | *When we first established the organisation, we agreed that we are not going to apply for any kind of project that might be into conflict with the purposes of the association, that is the recognition of youth work, the professional development of youth work, and so on.* |
| Italy | *Sometimes we do not speak the same language when we say youth work. It may depend from our local communities, from the experience had with a certain group of youth, the perception of the families, etc. At the same time, confusion about our role and the methodologies still reigns – unfortunately. /---/ The fact of not having a common framework to refer, creates disparity and fragmentation in youth work.* |

| | |
|---|---|
| Malta | *Having a base where youth workers from Malta can go to - as a reference point, as a monitoring body to speak on behalf of the youth workers with regards to the warrants, youth policies and with the Youth Work Profession Board.* |
| Netherlands | *To monitor, strengthen and stimulate child and youth work in the Netherlands. We do this for you as a professional and for our youth in the Netherlands.* |
| North-Macedonia | *As the vision of the organization is, what we are working for and looking forward to is: the youth work is a recognized profession and there is a functional support system for youth and youth workers./---/ Now we need to work on establishing a system for monitoring the quality of youth work. Except for the youth work law that is still to be adopted, the other steps for recognition are already completed. Once all of that is completed, we will need to focus on supporting youth work's continuous development* |
| Portugal | *To propose legislation, as well as actions to help in the regulation of the Youth sector and to promote the image of youth worker. /---/ Cooperation and networking actions to and for youth workers.* |

**Table 3.** Main goals and strategies of the youth workers associations in project countries (extracts from the interviews)

When talking more specifically about what **youth workers expect from associations**, some repeating topics like qualifications and standards (in some cases referring to the quality of work and in other cases referring to the working conditions) came up. Youth workers do expect training and information possibilities, but those have to be in accordance with changes happening in the world, for example mental health crisis or feelings of instability caused by the rapid changes and crisis happening in the world etc. look like the future trends associations will have to address (and already are addressing) as well. As mentioned in the interviews – youth workers also need the sense of informal belonging to the group (practice community) and active networking. Youth workers need to be empowered themselves. These expectations are largely met in the agendas of associations.

The importance of **recognition of youth work** was emphasized in all the interviews. Recognition of youth work and youth workers is a challenge in all countries. All interviews included also the topic of **advocacy and lobby work** on behalf of and for youth workers. Advocacy on behalf of youth workers:

> *Estonia: But then also the other side of it is that one of the goals is also to represent youth workers and to kind of like advocacy. To make sure that youth workers have good working conditions and that there is this kind of power in youth workers uniting.*

> *Portugal: Strengthen and dignify "youth worker" in Portugal, as well as their recognition in the Republic and the organisation representing young people.*

All in all, this means that youth workers associations work very hard to address the expectations of youth workers regarding their professional development, but at the same time they have to work on the policy making level and influence youth policy (and other) decisions on national, regional or local levels. Lobbying takes time: making connections, using those connections in the benefit of youth work etc.

> *North-Macedonia: What we are doing is also in visiting local municipalities, which also helps both for political and social recognition, through creating supporters in making decisions on local level.*

> *Italy: Identification of a youth workers organisation at a national level is helping youth workers to find common solutions to common problems.*

So, associations have **a lot of work** on their agenda, a lot has been achieved and there is a lot to be done. We need to be reminded, that most of the work is done on voluntary or project funding bases. The sense of mission and passion driving those people leading the work of associations, but which is also visible in youth work sector in general, was uplifted in interviews.

> *Estonia: … in every project we had real success stories. We don't have any projects where we didn't succeed, I think what we were planning, everything happened. I think this is that if we do something, then we do it with passion and to the end.*

The associations of youth workers are places where professionalisation can begin or continuous professionalisation can be supported. Associations of youth workers just starting or re-starting their work might struggle to fulfil their agenda and goals – this is strongly related to financing, which on the other hand is related to how well known or how strong the association appears – a vicious cyclee. If the legislative framework and clear understanding of youth work are in place this cycle is easier to break.

**Figure 3.** Situation of youth workers associations in project countries: strengths and challenges

To sum up the situation of youth workers associations please see figure 3 where strengths and main challenges are demonstrated together. Referring back to the community of practice development stages (see figure 1), it is apparent that associations participating in the research are mainly moving from the establishing stage to committing and evolving stages: building up identity of the domain and taking stewardship for the domain, but also expanding membership and pushing frame of competences; gaining influence or renewing standards and seeking innovation. Although Wenger-Trayner (2023) do not speak about development stages taking place simultaneously, it seems to be happening in case of youth workers associations – borders between developmental stages are not clear and this is also connected to the overload of work, as there seems to be certain thrive towards the stewardship of the domain and evolving stage.

Some of the success stories of the associations or what they are proud of are connected with achievements and work done, already described: active and committed members who are part of the association; growth of the organisation; cooperation and international projects; being influential and key or strategic partner within youth work sector on national level. The common challenge for the associations is insecurity due to the lack of resources which also causes overload of work and some struggle around achieving the goals.

## 3.3. Cooperation. European dimension

The importance of the cooperation was emphasised in the interviews, and cooperation was discussed both at the national and international level. All organisations had been using Erasmus plus funding possibilities. All organisations were exposed to cooperation in Europe with different project work and networking possibilities.

Expectations for the European umbrella organisation of youth workers associations were connected with the main themes already touched upon earlier: supporting professional development and identity of youth workers and youth work – sharing best practices, partnering in training or other possibilities, sharing information, discussing current and future status and trends of youth work and doing better lobbying for the recognition of youth work in Europe.

Raising the sense of stability of the associations and opening up new possibilities for the funding and other resources (for example mobility and research) were also seen as an important task of the future organisation.

| | |
|---|---|
| Czech | *…there are processes running alongside, structured dialogue, the European Youth Strategy, which itself contains the 11 objectives, is highly relevant to take it from the level of policy to the level of practical application. If there is something that I see in that cooperation, it is that it is quite an exclusive gateway for those representatives of those youth councils and the staff of the European Youth Forum, but it does not translate down, it does not translate that European language into the normal language of what is relevant for young people and what should be relevant for those associations. /…/ so that we could transfer all this into everyday life, so that people might know something about it. Most of the time it's really exclusive to those who are involved professionally.* |
| Estonia | *Generally, it's so important to have different cooperation between different partners and maybe if we'll have this one umbrella organisation, maybe then we can also be strongly part of European Union and also Council of Europe, because now youth associations have direct contact to them, maybe this cooperation between youth workers organisations also will give us the link for this kind of direct cooperation. Maybe this could be one idea. Because always it's so important to change experience, to cooperate, to discuss, to get to know good practices /…/ and maybe like in general,it would be interesting for us to discusse some* |

| | |
|---|---|
| | *of these future trends or things that affect young people, that somehow that we would keep up with these changes.* |
| Greece | *So with that association we are targeting and we are aiming to support youth workers rights, and to advocate even more for the recognition of youth work in the countries. So the link that I find and is good that we are part of this project, that our association is linked with other associations in European level.* |
| Italy | *Youth workers are creating more and more groups and coalitions to confront the current changes in youth work and discuss the Bonn Process* |
| Malta | *There's also hope by having an European Coalition, which supports our work and youth work. This would be beneficial knowing that some structures of our work are supported at a EU level too.* |
| Netherlands | *The cooperation with youth associations in Europe should be one of mutual reinforcement between different countries. It is also important for the Netherlands that we can learn from other countries: not only to bring, but also to receive. That is why we would also like to strengthen cooperation with the Western European countries.* |
| North-Macedonia | *Sharing practices, support by all members for advocacy efforts on a national level; joint lobbying for increased funds for youth work across Europe; sharing information and expertise; advocacy in front of European institutions – more relevant for our country nowadays given the EU accession process. Having this kind of network would directly benefit youth workers through provision of access to resources, mobilities, educational opportunities, sharing information etc* |
| Portugal | *We consider that the following points would be key for our organization and youth work in Europe: sharing best practices, increasing funds for youth work in EU and access to more resources, mobilities, educational opportunities for youth works. Also - creating common legislation on youth work across EU.* |

**Table 4.** Opinions on European umbrella organisation.
(*extracts from the interviews*)

There are also some cautions and fears based on the experiences of youth associations which already have an umbrella organisation and are well represented on EU level and included in different processes. The fear for exclusiveness – who would and can be involved when representing youth workers on EU level, is a justified question. European umbrella organisation for youth work associations should not create ´elite youth workers` or leave behind any country.

Also the problem of ´translating` European youth work policy into the practice language and national contexts is a great challenge which we already have anyway.

# 4. Discussion

Youth workers associations who are NGO-s struggle with insecurity and are often working on project based funding. This is described as the main challenge by all associations who participated in this research. In those countries where funding has been guaranteed one way or other – for example on national level, associations are growing. Working on voluntary and mission or value based principles is admirable and also a very clear characteristic of the community of practice (Wenger-Trayner, E; Wenger-Trayner, B 2023). Strong motivation of those in the lead of organisations became visible in the interviews, but might not be sustainable for a long time. Insecurity is perceived by the leaders or active members of the associations.

Youth workers associations have different size and history and are clearly dependant on the national context and framework of youth work. Solid youth policy and youth work frame (laws, standards, regulation, funding, training etc.) open up different challenges – clearer focus on professional growth of youth workers can be taken. At the same time, if youth policy and youth work frame are not yet strong, youth workers associations can have an important role in lobbying for that. This is in line with the concept of the strong practice architecture (Kiilakoski 2018), where professional associations are one important component for the strong practice to flourish.

Youth workers associations are understandably mainly focused on supporting youth workers professional development and identity which goes together with supporting the general understanding and essence of youth work itself. Advocacy on behalf of youth workers and about the value they bring to society are strongly connected with the wider recognition of youth work. Therefore youth workers associations play (or wish to play) an important role on national level in lobbying for youth work and youth workers – one cannot be done without another. There is a clear consensus that youth workers associations want to be the stewards of the domain as described by Wenger-Trayner (2023). Communication is seen important in this process, as well as cooperation and partnerships (alliancies).

There are two dimensions of the work being done by associations: policy dimension which includes lobbying, representing youth workers and letting their voice be heard, involvement in different initiatives of other fields, but also research, quality development of youth work, etc, which can be seen as claiming the domain and strengthening the practice (ibid.,)

The other dimension is direct work with youth workers to empower them and support their professional development which happens in different forms and outcomes: working groups, projects, trainings, information work, informal gatherings, summer schools, etc. Associations seem to be well aware of what youth workers expect of them and are providing those activities. This is about strengthening the community (ibid.,)

This is also in line with the previous research as well, where both dimensions – activities supporting professional growth together with the role of representing youth workers and lobbying for them was clear (Corney et al, 2020).

It is apparent that the associations and leading and/or active members have been investing and still are investing a lot of time and other resources into this mainly voluntary work to promote youth work and together with that youth workers work. This work has been fruitful: there is a certain pride visible in gaining the strategic partner and key-partner position or in the fact that all associations seem to have a good relationship with the ministries or other national institutions responsible for the youth policy and youth work. In this way youth workers associations can be considered as agents of youth work on national level. This takes us to the international cooperation and networking between associations.

Youth workers associations who participated in this project see, of course, the benefit of European-wide networking and cooperation – otherwise they wouldn't have joined the project. Benefits that they see from either starting informal networks or more formal umbrella organisations vary also on both dimensions already described – benefitting professional development of youth workers and working together on policy level, e.g on lobbying and recognition of youth work and youth workers. Sharing and opening up new possibilities of funding are also one of the possible benefits seen. Some risks were also mentioned regarding inclusion of the voice of all youth workers on European level and making good translation between practice and policy ´languages`. The more practitioners are involved, the more the problem of ´translation` can be possibly avoided. Principles and development stages of building community of practice on European level should also be considered.

# 5. Conclusions

To answer research questions shortly.

1. Youth workers associations profiles: NGO-s, working on mainly voluntary and project work bases, struggling with funding and insecurity, at the same time key partners on the national level for the ministries and other institutions responsible for youth work. Consider themselves now (or in close future) rather influential in the youth work field. Cooperating with different organisations both on national and international level. Make a lot from Erasmus+ funding possibilities. Well aware of the importance of communication and information.

2. Main goals of youth workers associations are connected with supporting professional development and identity of youth workers. This means many activities towards and for and with youth workers. Associations realize that in order to support youth workers they need to work towards understanding, quality and recognition of youth work, which means also lobbying and advocacy. All in all this means a lot of work on two dimensions: personal and collective professional dimension (community and practice); policy dimension (domain and practice). Considering the problems with insecurity, funding and that the work is mostly done on voluntary bases, this might be heavy responsibility and work overload for people leading the associations – passion and mission were mentioned as main drivers, but can it be sustainable, is the question to consider.

3. All participating countries were interested in developing European umbrella organisation for the youth workers associations and saw many benefits for their work on both dimensions mentioned above in nr 2. Some risks were also mentioned: the fear of ´elite` youth workers organisation and leaving local practitioners behind, but also the fear of European ´policy language` taking over the practice or being untranslatable to the practitioners.

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