

SHRINKING SPACES

Youth work under pressure

Expert Forum at the 17th German Child and Youth Welfare Congress

REPORT AND DOCUMENTATION

AUTHOR: HANJO SCHILD

The expert forum took place at the virtual 17th German Child and Youth Welfare Congress (in German *Deutscher Kinder- und Jugendhilfetag* or DJHT) from 18 to 20 May 2021, whose motto was “*We create future - now!*”, as part of the European workshop programme.

The forum kicked off on 18 May with a panel entitled *Youth Work in Europe under pressure: Between claims & reality*. The aim was to examine the increasingly limited opportunities available to civil society groups, with specific emphasis on youth work, to address the current challenges facing civil society from different perspectives and to explore the scope for action and respective strategies to counteract the shrinking spaces phenomenon.

On the next day, four expert forum workshops spotlighted specific thematic areas and challenges associated with the eponymous shrinking spaces in youth work, allowing for deeper reflection on the following topics: 1. *Youth Work under pressure from the right*; 2. *Shrinking budgets: Post Corona, what will be left?*; 3. *When circumstances shift: Youth work responses to social change*; 4. *New spaces for youth work – Opportunities and challenges of digitalisation*.

While the opening session was hosted by the German Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ (Expert Committee II), the four workshops had been organised by JUGEND für Europa, the National Agency for the EU programmes Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps.

A documentation of the expert forum can be found at
➔ <https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/shrinkingspaces/>

CONTENTS

↘ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
↘ <i>Opening Session</i> YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE UNDER PRESSURE: BETWEEN CLAIMS & REALITY	5
↘ Expert Forum Workshops SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE	8
WS 1: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE FROM THE RIGHT	8
WS 2: SHRINKING BUDGETS: POST CORONA, WHAT WILL BE LEFT? ...	12
WS 3: WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES SHIFT: YOUTH WORK'S RESPONSE TO SOCIAL CHANGE	15
WS 4: NEW SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK - OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF DIGITALISATION	18
↘ CONCLUSIONS	22
↘ REFERENCES	23

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many societies today face a backslide of democracy, human rights and the rule of law and increasingly prominent right-wing and populist movements, accompanied by new authoritarianism and political restrictions in “illiberal” states. Social change (incorporating demographic change, growing inequality and inequity, a widening urban/rural divide) is affecting our societies, while a widespread neoliberal agenda is producing uncertainty and fear. Besides these developments, digitalisation has triggered an increasing techlash (a negative reaction to the growing power and influence of large technology companies) and digital control, while the COVID-19 pandemic is additionally affecting democratic and civic life.

The pressure on civil society organisations and particularly on child and youth welfare providers is generally increasing, while its spaces for action are shrinking. All European countries are affected by these developments in some way or another; they are not limited to autocratic states. The situation, however, varies: in some countries the increased pressure is being put on intentionally, in others the phenomenon is unintentional. In some, the pressure is occasioned by an explicit neoliberal agenda and/or austerity measures, while in others it reflects a strategy involving “illiberal” democracies and cultural hegemony. The impact of growing populist and right-wing extremism on civil society is evident everywhere, even in liberal and democratic countries. On top of it all, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are felt everywhere, particularly by the most vulnerable groups such as young people.

However, a key question for youth work is “What is new?”. Youth work (and related fields) have always been under pressure and have struggled to get recognition and support. Even pre-pandemic, youth work was always up against many barriers, government interference and lack of support. Thus, safeguarding (youth) civic spaces was always high up on the agenda for youth work as a matter of principle. In addition, the aforementioned developments have provoked resistance, resilience, civic engagement and solidarity actions, initiated and supported by (young) people, which proves that counterstrategies are possible and can help empower (young) people.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pursuing a counterstrategy holds some challenges for civil society including youth work in terms of legal frameworks (freedom of assembly, expression, association), financial resources (access and availability, competition, administrative capacities, eligibility, information, transparency, discrimination), participation/consultation, and harassment, threats, and attacks. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for youth work to build on a stable legal foundation as well as to have clear aims and objectives, well-defined target groups, competent youth workers and heterogeneous co-operation structures, of course in “normal times” but even more so in times of crisis and under emergency conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical, critical and conceptual updating of strategies is as crucial here as continuous internal quality assurance is.

To effectively counter shrinking spaces and growing pressure, some basic issues need to be considered, such as improved awareness of the role of civil society and youth work as laboratories for democracy, using legal provisions as effective means for protection and adherence to international laws and standards, providing resources and sustainable financial support for capacity building, creating stable infrastructures, strengthening the resilience of civil society organisations, networking, overcoming competition, learning from each other, engaging in dialogue and forming progressive alliances with other sectors, balancing interests and accepting compromises, using scope for manoeuvre and development, and promoting trans-European non-formal education for democratic and critical (youth) citizenship.

Opening Session YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE UNDER PRESSURE: BETWEEN CLAIMS & REALITY

The pressure on child and youth welfare institutions as well as on civil society organisations is increasing in terms of legislation, politics, and funding. This particularly affects actors and institutions that work in democratic citizenship education including child and youth work, whose room for manoeuvre and scope of activity is increasingly being restricted. All over Europe, there is a misalignment of the expectation that youth work should enable young people to live a self-determined life on the one hand and the financial and political framework conditions it operates under on the other. Associations, youth clubs and civil society organisations are increasingly threatened by financial constraints that often make their work more difficult, if not impossible. In the area of legislation, civil society organisations are also experiencing financial hardship and pressure to demonstrate legitimacy because of the withdrawal of their non-profit status and changes in tax law. Above all, polarisation and renationalisation in Europe's societies have led to associations and organisations being increasingly exposed to (right-wing) attacks, their scope for action restricted, and their work delegitimised. As a result, young people are losing vital spaces for experimenting and becoming independent, while their rights to participation and involvement are being curtailed.

Speakers:

- **Waltraud Heller**, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights – FRA
- **Prof. Dr. Howard Williamson**, University of South Wales, UK
- **Silja Markkula**, European Youth Forum - YFJ
- **Prof. Dr. Andreas Thimmel**, Technical University of Applied Sciences, Cologne

Facilitators:

- **Hans-Georg Wicke**, JUGEND für Europa
- **Dr. Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll**, German Youth Institute

Opening Session **YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE UNDER PRESSURE: BETWEEN CLAIMS & REALITY**

Waltraud Heller provided a comparison and assessment of the current situation of civil society based on scientific data and monitoring on shrinking spaces for civil society, which shows that the pressure on civil society organisations in general and on child and youth welfare providers in particular is increasing in terms of legislation, politics and funding. She focused on legal and financial challenges, participation/consultation and threats, and harassment and attacks. She discussed strategies to counter shrinking spaces such as raising awareness, an adherence to and use of (international) laws and standards, the provision of resources and capacities, greater resilience on the part of civil society organisations, and greater solidarity among stakeholders.

Howard Williamson examined the shrinking spaces phenomenon from the European youth work perspective, focusing particularly on the expectations placed on youth work regarding the aims and objectives of current strategies, such as the European Youth Work Agenda and related Bonn Process, and linking that to the challenges and framework conditions faced by the youth work community today. Unresolved and recurrent issues (and thus challenges) for youth work can be grouped around buzzwords like concept, competence, credibility, connections, and crisis (and opportunity). It is therefore vital for youth work to be able to rely on a stable legal foundation as well as on clear aims and objectives, well-defined target groups, competent youth workers and heterogeneous co-operation structures, both in "normal times" but also in times of crisis and under emergency conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical, critical and conceptual updating of strategies is as crucial as continuous internal quality assurance.

Silja Markkula provided the perspective of European youth work organisations and looked at current challenges relating to demands/requirements and realities, examined experiences of shrinking spaces on the part of youth NGOs, and what the European Youth Forum is doing to support its members and youth workers in general.

Andreas Thimmel looked from a German-specific academic perspective at shrinking spaces in youth work and drew a connection between the European and the national level. He outlined challenges and approaches that exist in the German context and illustrated how youth work is responding to aims, demands, realities and rooms for manoeuvre in the current situation.

EXPERT FORUM

Opening Session YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE UNDER PRESSURE: BETWEEN CLAIMS & REALITY

Lessons learnt:

- All European countries, not only autocratic states, are witnessing shrinking and changing spaces for civil society. The situation however varies: in some countries the increased pressure is being put on intentionally, in others the phenomenon is unintentional. In some, the pressure is occasioned by a neoliberal agenda and/or austerity measures, while in others it reflects a strategy involving “illiberal” democracies and cultural hegemony. That said, the impact of growing populist and right-wing extremism on civil society is evident everywhere. Accordingly, civil society is challenged in the areas of legislation, budgets, participation and threats.
- A key question is “What is new for youth work?”, given that the field has always been under pressure and has had to seek support for and recognition of its value, acting in a triangle with other contested fields, such as human rights and civic space.
- What is certainly new is the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, particularly for most vulnerable groups including young people, who struggle with precarious employment or no employment at all, delayed education, an insufficient quality of education, and physical and mental health issues including depression and the impact of (self-) isolation. Besides these personal dimensions, the pandemic also affects societal dimensions, such as the work of civil society groups and youth organisations, reflected in a declining level of youth involvement.
- The youth work community’s room for manoeuvre is bounded by the dimensions of recognition, resources and regulation. Consequently, it must create its own space, on both front and backstage, and needs to regenerate by exploring and exploiting new spaces (including digital) and building progressive alliances.
- To counter these shrinking spaces, some aspects should be considered going forward:
 - Greater awareness of civil society and youth work as laboratories for democracy
 - Adherence to international laws and standards, employing legislation more effectively
 - Availability of resources for capacity building and sustainable financial support
 - Existence of stable infrastructures and greater resilience on the part of civil society organisations
 - Networking, overcoming competition, balancing interests, accepting compromises
 - Creation of dialogue and progressive alliances with other sectors
 - Use of scope for manoeuvre and development
 - Promotion of trans-European non-formal education for democratic citizenship

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

In many ways, current financial, legal, and social developments, including the COVID-19 pandemic, pose a major challenge for civil society organisations and youth work providers.

Public budgets for youth work are being slashed and legal obstacles (e.g. non-profit status) are hampering civic engagement and social development. Social change and societal trends, such as isolationism, a backsliding of democracy, (right-wing) populism and increasingly hostile polarisation are spreading across Europe. Meanwhile, digitalisation has brought new opportunities as well as challenges for youth work. On the one hand, these developments are limiting civil society groups' (and in turn, youth work's) scope for action; on the other, they require that the youth work community take a clear and confident stance when faced with these threats. What role can and should youth work occupy in this situation? How can youth work reconcile its societal mission to empower young people to live an independent life given the strained financial and political situation in which it operates? The presentations and workshops given during the expert forum were an opportunity to discuss these matters, exchange good practices, and find responses to these questions.

WS 1: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE FROM THE RIGHT

19 May 2021, 9:00–10:30 am

The rise of the political right, increasing state-sponsored restrictions and social division are a major challenge for the youth work community in many countries. In this situation, how can youth work maintain its scope for action?

The most recent edition of the CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report clearly shows that civic freedoms around the world are increasingly coming under threat – not just in the Global South, but also in established democracies in the industrialised north and west. They are under pressure from anti-democratic forces and are struggling with a multitude of challenges, including increasingly stringent laws governing non-profit organisations, a curtailed right of assembly and freedom of opinion, and the de-legitimisation of protests. Activists are intimidated, threatened, and criminalised. These constraints on civil society action are the result of government-sponsored restriction and repression on the one hand and of social developments on the other.

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

In recent years, many societies have experienced a political shift to the right; new conflicts have been triggered or existing conflicts exacerbated; and populations have become deeply divided. Associations, organisations and individual stakeholders are vulnerable to attacks from the right, their scope for action is curtailed, and their work is denied legitimacy. The youth work sector, too, is equally affected, in particular the organisations working in democracy-building and civic education. In many European countries, the pandemic has been a welcome opportunity to curtail democratic civic engagement.

This workshop explored the situation faced by civil society groups in Europe against the backdrop of an increasingly tangible political and social shift to the right. It kicked off with two inputs and a panel discussion. The first input provided a general overview of the restrictions imposed on civil society across Europe that are occasioned by the rise of right-wing forces in politics as well as in civil society itself. The second focused on the youth work sector, using examples from specific countries to demonstrate the state-sponsored restrictions that youth work faces in Europe. Finally, a panel discussion with the speakers and some youth work practitioners whose projects have been directly impacted by right-wing forces examined what solutions and strategies are available to the youth work community in this situation.

Speakers:

- **Peter Matjašič**, Open Society Initiative for Europe, Spain
- **Tomaž Deželan**, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
- **Vilja Arató**, Power of Humanity Foundation, Hungary
- **Irina Bohn**, Institut für Sozialarbeit & Sozialpädagogik, Germany

Facilitators:

- **Christin Voigt**, (International) youth work coach, toolpool

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

Peter Matjašič: Europe's democratic backsliding: Civic freedoms under pressure (input 1)

Recent years are characterised by a backsliding of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, a resurgence in far-right populism, new religious alliances, authoritarianism, etc. While these developments undermine civic space, they also galvanise resistance, solidarity, and action/civic engagement (e.g. feminist and climate movements). Safeguarding youth civic spaces in particular must remain high on the agenda because of their importance to the health of democratic societies and the well-being of young people. This civic space consists of five elements: an inclusive landscape, respect for legal freedom, a supportive framework for civil society organisations, dialogue between civil society and governments, and a civic society that is resilient in terms of its responses to upcoming challenges.

Tomaž Deželan: Safeguarding civic space for young people in Europe (input 2)

Open and democratic physical, virtual and legal civic spaces are crucial for citizens, in particular when it comes to ensuring young people's agency and their participation in society. Youth-led youth organisations and other youth work associations as well as non-organised groups are laboratories of democracy and catalysts of social innovation. Globally, spaces are shrinking, expressed in a reversal of past transitions and the silencing of the voice of civil society. In concrete terms, limitations are being placed on freedom of information and expression, the right to assembly and association and to acknowledge opinions, decreasing advocacy and collaboration with public authorities as well as limited access to funding.

Vilja Arató: Swimming against the tide – Working under difficult conditions, right-wing actors and state restrictions (project example)

The rise of populist regimes in some countries, including Hungary, has created a hostile environment for NGOs and civil society in general, leading also to cuts in public funding, including EU funds. Strengthening social inclusion by supporting oppressed, discriminated groups, raising awareness and building democratic societies is thus hindered and restricted. While the work of this project is crucial to sustaining viable democratic societies, it must be questioned to what extent it is worthwhile and feasible to constantly swim against the tide.

EXPERT FORUM

Expert Forum Workshops SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE

Irina Bohn: Shrinking spaces: Options for action in (youth) work in light of right-wing and populist attempts to restrict civil society (recommendations for action)

The consensus on the relevance of civil society for democratic life is under threat from right-wing and populist networks, which attack, defame and hinder initiatives, NGOs and their staff. The spectrum of activities to limit the scope of action reaches from de-legitimation and defamation to interference, hindrance, hostility and harassment. A counterstrategy could consist of six elements: preparation and anticipation, solidary networks, awareness-raising, establishment of support structures, monitoring, and strengthening of youth work.

Lessons learnt:

- As a general trend, civic space is shrinking, with a backsliding of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The neoliberal agenda and social market failure have led to fear and uncertainty, which is instrumentalised by right-wing actors and populist movements and accompanied by restrictions in “illiberal” states. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the general trend and puts civil society including youth work under additional pressure.
- However, there is also hope: not only do these developments undermine civic space, they also galvanise and provoke resistance, resilience, civic engagement and solidarity actions, in particular initiated and supported by young people.
- Where does the youth work community stand in this situation? Safeguarding civic spaces must remain high on the agenda because of their importance to the health of democratic societies and the well-being of (young) people. Counterstrategies are possible and should consist of a package of activities, foremost a strengthening of youth work, which helps empower young people to “constantly swim against the tide”. In this regard, the Erasmus+ Youth programme and the implementing National Agencies can play a supportive role.

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

WS 2: SHRINKING BUDGETS: POST CORONA, WHAT WILL BE LEFT?

19 May 2021, 10:45 am–12:15 pm

The youth work sector is no stranger to tight budgets. However, to what extent have the coronavirus pandemic and its economic consequences made things even worse? How can youth work maintain its scope for action in this situation?

For years, the financial resources available to the youth work sector in many parts of Europe have been limited at best, a situation that for a long time has been subject to a lot of discussion in the field. Chronic underfunding, the result of a lack of funding mechanisms and/or permanent cutbacks, is endemic throughout the community. Youth work funding is typically tied to a certain project, and structured long-term financial support for youth work is a rarity. The fact that tight budgets are a challenge for organisations and providers is hardly news; however, the coronavirus pandemic and its (economic) impact are shining a particularly harsh light on the situation.

Public budgets all over Europe are under immense pressure owing to the enormous financial straits the pandemic has imposed on them, which – it is assumed – means that budgets in particular for social activities will soon be slashed as well. In this context, the youth sector, too, is severely vulnerable.

This workshop provided an overview of the challenging financial situation of Europe's youth work sector, with particular emphasis given to developments since the pandemic began. How are shrinking financial spaces affecting youth work in individual countries? In addition, has the pandemic changed or accelerated these trends? The session started with a summary of the pandemic-induced (financial) challenges facing European youth work, based on data from an international research project (RAY-COR). The subsequent inputs focused on the financial resources available to the youth work sector, whether it is eligible for assistance under the EU's post-corona economic recovery package, and - using the example of the UK - how local youth work is faring in this situation. To conclude, a panel discussion was held with all speakers with another opportunity for audience participation.

Speakers:

- **Andreas Karsten**, RAY Network - Research-based analysis of European youth programmes
- **Simon Lindkær Andersen**, European Youth Forum
- **Colin Brent**, In Defense of Youth Work, UK

Facilitators:

- **Christin Voigt**, (International) youth work coach, toolpool

EXPERT FORUM

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

Andreas Karsten: Results of the Research-based Analysis of European Youth Programmes and the Impact of the Corona Pandemic (RAY-COR) (input 1)

The “Research-based Analysis of European Youth Programmes and the impact of the Corona pandemic” project (RAY-COR) analyses the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on youth work in Europe and the potential response of youth work, including the role of European youth programmes and European youth policies in supporting youth work and young people in mastering the effects of the pandemic. Preliminary results show an economic impact, illustrated by an unstable financial situation as well as a loss of participants, which is affecting foremost young people from marginalised backgrounds. The positive news is that youth work helps young people navigate these unsecure times, while the digital competences of youth workers, digital pedagogy and infrastructure remain a challenge.

Simon Lindkær Andersen: Support for youth work and volunteering activities and organisations that deliver them is at risk in Europe – thus risking the existence of democratic societies (input 2)

Groups whose rights were not fully implemented before the pandemic are experiencing further deterioration of their access to rights today, a phenomenon that disproportionately affects young people. They face a multitude of barriers, government interference and even attacks on (youth) NGOs, as well as curtailed civic rights, funding, freedom of speech, right to assembly and access to decision-making. Despite all these negative trends, we see a vibrant but undervalued landscape of youth organisations, both well established and new. Participation and inclusion are key to healthy and sustainable democracies, which is why (young) people’s rights need to be guaranteed including a sharing of power as well as financial and other support for spaces and structures, including youth and youth work organisations.

Expert Forum Workshops SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE

Colin Brent: Youth work: Do you really need that? (project example)

For the past two decades, (open) youth work in the UK and elsewhere has been undergoing a crisis of identity, while its value and necessity have been constantly questioned by public authorities and policy-makers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth workers experienced more uncertainty than ever, particularly regarding their relationship with young people: since youth centres or youth clubs were closed, on one hand they were unable to remain in touch with those, who didn't show up for online activities; on the other, they intensified their contact to those, who did, and were increasingly challenged by the situation. The latter shows that open youth work is indeed needed, especially in times of crisis. Youth work must be a radical space for young people, enabling them to learn from each other. They need space for conflict resolution, power dissection and exploration, as well as the creation of new and fairer ways of living together as a society.

Lessons learnt:

- Research (RAY-COR, YFJ) and the experience of practitioners confirm the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth work in terms of questioning its values and principles, increasing economic and financial pressure and "loss" of target groups, in particular marginalised young people. However, the pressures youth work faces are not new. Already before the pandemic, youth work and youth organisations in many countries experienced a multitude of barriers, government interference and even attacks. As the example from the UK shows, the neoliberal agenda has endangered the provision of youth work for two decades now, especially in youth centres and youth clubs.
- Research and practice have also shown that youth work helps to empower young people to navigate, experiment and adapt to what is called "the new normal" provided it can provide them with radical spaces for learning and developing a critical sense of citizenship, including the creation of new and fairer ways of living together as a society.
- Challenges for youth work remain in the shape of lack of sustainable financial support, participatory approaches in decision-making and identity-building in terms of values, aims and objectives. Competition between different types of youth work and between different target groups must be put aside.

EXPERT FORUM

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

WS 3: WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES SHIFT: YOUTH WORK'S RESPONSE TO SOCIAL CHANGE

19 May 2021, 2–3:30 pm

At this event, participants discussed how youth work could maintain its scope for action in light of demographic change, rising social inequalities and rural flight among young people. The “shrinking spaces” concept is controversial. Critics claim that it fails to take sufficient account of civil society’s autonomy from the state. Rather than focus on the external influences that shape civil society’s action space, they say, more attention should be given to other (social) factors that limit the scope for action of certain civil society stakeholders, including the youth work community.

Instead of speaking of shrinking spaces, according to critics, it is more appropriate to think of changing spaces for civil society action. Among the changing circumstances that shape this action space are demographic change, social inequality and the often stark divide between urban and rural areas in terms of population structure, infrastructure, etc. The youth work sector is similarly vulnerable to these changes. In a rapidly ageing society that is marked by ever deeper social divides across large parts of Europe, as well as pronounced rural flight among the younger generation, the youth work sector needs to consider how to maintain or even extend its scope for action.

This workshop started with an in-depth examination of these shifting circumstances – demographic change, social inequality, the urban/rural divide – that shape civil society action and in particular could limit what youth work can accomplish. Youth (work) researchers applied these arguments to the youth work sector itself before transitioning to an open discussion involving the audience, during which representatives of a local youth work organisation in Croatia shared how they have been dealing with these challenges.

Speakers:

- **Dr. Siri Hummel**, Maecenata Institute for Philanthropy & Civil Society, Berlin
- **Cristina Bacalso**, independent youth researcher
- **Alexandra Podrebarac**, Carpe Diem Youth Centre, Croatia

Facilitators:

- **Andreas Karsten**, RAY-Research-based analysis of European youth programmes

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

Siri Hummel: When circumstances shift - Demographic change, social inequality, urban/rural divide shaping civil society action (input 1)

Civil society is vital for a functioning society, for strengthening social cohesion and improving individuals' quality of life. Civil society in its diversity is constantly changing with new forms of associations, fields of engagement or new ways of donations as well as increasing politicisation. It is crucial to differentiate between micro, meso and macro levels of action since they reflect different power structures. Megatrends in social change are demographic change, social inequality and the urban-rural divide, all of which have a crucial impact on civil society as well as on (increasing) volunteering and activism. The impact of demographic change is reflected in terms of different volunteering styles across generations as well as different causes. Young people tend to engage more on digitalisation and the environment, are less committed to organisational contexts, are less institutional, and more political. At the same time, long-term-volunteering and engagement in leading positions are decreasing. The impact of social inequality is reflected in the fact that participation in activism and civil society is influenced by education, gender, ethnicity and income. Regarding the urban-rural divide, rural populations tend to be more involved in civic engagement than their urban counterparts are.

Cristina Bacalso: A critical (re)turn: European youth work and changing civic spaces (input 2)

Social, political, economic circumstances are always shifting, yet recently social and economic inequality and inequity as persistent problems have been growing, reinforced by the coronavirus pandemic. In its response to inequity and inequalities, the youth field should employ critical social theory as a way to understand and addressing societal structures, which are characterised by inequity, to analyse structures of privilege, oppression and power, and to identify opportunities to change and transform those structures. Critical consciousness and intersectionality are key components of a critical social theory. Critical consciousness consists of three components: critical reflection, political efficacy and critical action. Intersectionality addresses discrimination and marginalisation with an intersectional approach and characterises systems of privilege and oppression as multifaceted and interrelated. Thus, critical social theory provides potential for "critical youth citizenship" as an approach to help youth work extend its scope for action as a reaction to "de-politicised" European youth work. This includes working on socio-political issues based on democratic values and human rights, focusing more on policy and politics and on youth participation in broader spaces and closer to the grassroots level, recognising marginalisation and systems of discrimination, extending contextualisation to other groups, and giving visibility to the voices of those on the margins.

Expert Forum Workshops SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE

Alexandra Podrebarac: Grabrik Youth Centre in Karlovac, Croatia (project example)

Grabrik Youth Centre is a typical open youth centre providing information, education and culture for ALL young people, including non-formal learning and leisure activities based on participatory approaches. Major challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic have included the need to reach out to visitors and target groups, provoking a need for online activities. Other challenges are the qualification and competences of youth workers/staff and the fact that young people are leaving rural areas for the cities. Shrinking spaces for youth work are expressed in real terms through budget cuts, a growing administrative burden and bureaucracy, demanding project management, the unco-operativeness of decision-makers and more generally an ignorance of the values that characterise youth work.

Lessons learnt:

- Social change, marked by demographic change, inequality and the urban/rural divide impacts civil society and related actions, such as volunteering. New forms of association, new fields and new ways of engagement are emerging, accompanied by a growing politicisation of civil society actors. By contrast, barely any new structures have been developed, making the work of civil society organisations and citizens all the more difficult. Thus, actors in the field of youth need to change current as well as create new structures.
- When responding to phenomena of social change, in particular growing inequity and inequalities, the youth sector should sharpen its conceptual and strategic orientation by building on critical social theory and its key components, critical consciousness and intersectionality. Both have the potential to help youth work respond to social change and related challenges, including a change in existing structures that shape societal conditions and circumstances.
- Critical social theory also provides potential for “critical youth citizenship” as an approach to help youth work extend its scope for action. Given that youth work is always political in a way (much like our daily life), this would offer a response to a rather “de-politicised” European youth work. Community development, policy advocacy and youth work as well as work tailored to specific groups of young people could be appropriate and fitting strategic options for change.

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

WS 4: NEW SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK – OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF DIGITALISATION

19 May 2021, 3:45–5:15 pm

Digitalisation has opened up new spaces for youth work to use in their activities for young people. On the one hand, this is resulting in entirely new opportunities; on the other, there are also major challenges. How is the youth work community responding to digitalisation? And how can it do better?

Digitalisation is increasingly affecting all parts of our lives and multiplying opportunities for interaction. Youth work is no exception; in fact, digital activities have become indispensable when it comes to reaching out to and communicating appropriately with young people. In addition, youth work has no choice but to engage with the processes of digitalisation if it wants to empower young people to navigate and participate in today's increasingly digitalised society.

In this regard, digitalisation appears to have greatly expanded the available spaces for youth work. Activities are no longer restricted to a certain location; bridging even large distances is no longer a problem. Organisations can use digital activities to reach out to new target groups. Digital activities can be more inclusive than their on-site equivalents. Finally, the pandemic and social distancing have meant that digital youth work is now more important and more diverse than ever. That said, these new spaces are also presenting youth work and more generally, civic engagement with challenges. Many digital tools were developed by major (profit-oriented) tech corporations. Data privacy can be an issue. Phenomena such as online hate speech can make civic engagement more difficult and even pose a concrete threat to organisations and individuals alike. In the youth work sector, it has been shown that access to digital activities is by no means a given; some young people simply have no way to benefit from them.

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

This workshop started by outlining the challenges of digitalisation for the youth work sector and discussed the role that digital technologies can play, for better or worse. A second input explored the opportunities of digitalisation for youth work in the shape of new spaces and new target groups. These were illustrated using practical examples that demonstrate how projects have been using digital spaces and what their experiences have been. What groups have they been able to reach out to? How should digital spaces be designed, so their potential can be fully leveraged? And where are the pitfalls, especially when using digital spaces as a platform for promoting social issues and initiatives?

Speakers:

- **Dr. Lasse Siurala**, Aalto University, Finland
- **Anne Kivimäe**, Tartu University Narva College, Estonia
- **Justyna Nakielska**, Campaign Against Homophobia, Poland
- **Jürgen Ertelt & Sabine Humpf**, International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany, IJAB project "Jugendverstärker"

Facilitators:

- **Andreas Karsten**, RAY - Research-based analysis of European youth programmes

Lasse Siurala: Digitalisation – Restricting civil society and challenging youth agency (input 1)

From the 1980s to the Arab Spring in 2010, social media were considered being a liberating medium that promoted openness and democracy. Following this period of optimistic "faith" in the power of social media, currently there is a growing techlash against digital control, digital authoritarianism and democracy deficit on the one hand and, on the other, a lack of understanding and awareness on the part of civil society organisations, including the youth work field, of the negative effects, potential for abuse and risks of digitalisation, which are masked by the rhetoric employed by the digital technology community. As a scenario for civil society and youth agency, we need a paradigm shift from democracy deficit to dialogical politics and from rigid administrative processes and conflict-ridden relations to negotiating contracts in society. Youth work should promote digitalisation for the "social good", broaden the framework for youth work, create a hands-on critical digital literacy curriculum, empower young people to be critical, and develop a vision of an alternative digital future.

Expert Forum Workshops **SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE**

Anne Kivimäe: Shrinking spaces – expanding horizons: Opportunities and challenges for youth work (input 2)

Youth work has a crucial role to play in supporting, facilitating, creating conditions and opportunities for young people in new technological and social realities. “Smart youth work” as developed in Estonia considers the digitalisation of society and supports the development of digital skills of young people and youth workers. It helps achieve a better knowledge and understanding of youth and their realities, needs and opinions; it supports the provision of youth work, its planning, delivery and documentation and the visualisation of its results; and it facilitates youth (work) policy development by predicting trends and developments. Special attention must be given to inclusiveness and youth rights, the application of youth work values in digital contexts, and the continued provision of quality youth work including a renewal of youth worker training.

Justyna Nakielska: “LGBT-free zones”: Fighting LGBT phobia in Poland (project example)

The campaign by activists and human rights defenders against LGBT-free zones and LGBT phobia in Poland has had quite some success, although 30% of the country remains subject to discriminatory resolutions. The common fight consists of online and offline actions at local, national and international levels. The efforts show how the fight against local and national discriminatory issues can provoke international attention and solidarity, mostly through digital tools and advocacy.

Jürgen Ertelt & Sabine Humpf: Youth Amplifier – A digital trend barometer for relevant youth themes (project example)

Of utmost concern to the “Jugendverstärker” (“Youth Amplifier”) project is the digital participation of young people, in particular of those who do not engage in traditional forms of political participation. The project aims at making issues visible that usually stay invisible while dealing with data supported by machine learning algorithms. An intelligent software architecture was developed by young people and their mentors, while taking into account technical and ethical aspects.

Expert Forum Workshops SHRINKING SPACES: YOUTH WORK UNDER PRESSURE

Lessons learnt:

- On top of growing risks like a backsliding of democracy and new authoritarianism, we are witnessing a growing techlash and digital control, exponentially escalating growth of Big Tech, increased control via digital technology over civil society and youth, and increasing efforts on the part of governments and the EU to regulate tech companies.
- Many citizens are experiencing a “democracy deficit” also in digital terms. Addressing this deficit means creating awareness and understanding of digitalisation and its negative effects such as gaming addiction, ubiquitous social media, extremism, and fake news.
- Youth work has a role to play in countering these risks by supporting, facilitating and creating conditions and opportunities for young people that take account of the new technological and social realities they face. It should explore new avenues and align with relevant research and political strategies, promote “digitalisation for the common good”, create a hands-on critical digital literacy curriculum and concept, and empower young people to engage in critical thinking, also with a view to the digital future.
- It appears that “smart” (digital) youth work can be a strategy for pushing back against the mentioned risks (see Estonia) under the condition that it applies the values of youth work in digital contexts, promotes inclusiveness and youth rights, guarantees quality including youth worker education and training, and provides participatory (see the “Jugendverstärker” project) as well as anti-discriminatory approaches (see fight against homophobia in Poland).

EXPERT FORUM

EXPERT FORUM

CONCLUSIONS

Youth work has a role to play in countering the risks that young people are facing by supporting, facilitating and creating conditions and opportunities for them in their new technological and social realities and exploring new avenues for empowerment.

Youth work must help young people navigate, experiment and adapt to what is called “the new normal” and provide spaces where they can learn from each other, resolve conflicts, and create fairer ways of living together as a society. New forms of associations, new fields and new ways of engagement are emerging, accompanied by a growing politicisation of civil society actors. When responding to phenomena of social change, in particular growing inequity and inequalities, the youth sector must sharpen its conceptual and strategic orientation by building on critical social theory and emancipatory youth citizenship and thus help youth (work) respond to and shape social change. Digital youth work can be an additional “smart” tool for responding to risks provided certain conditions be met: the application of a set of values also in digital contexts, the promotion of inclusiveness and youth rights, a guarantee of quality, and the provision of participatory and anti-discriminatory approaches.

REFERENCES

- Alscher, Mareike; Priller, Eckhard; Ratka, Susanne and Strachwitz, Rupert Graf (2017): The Space for Civil Society: Shrinking? Growing? Changing?, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/54028/ssoar-2017-The_Space_for_Civil_Society.pdf
- Anheier, Helmut K.; Lang, Markus; Toepler, Stefan (2019): Civil society in times of change: Shrinking, changing and expanding spaces and the need for new regulatory approaches, Economics: The Open-Access, Open-Assessment E-Journal, ISSN 1864-6042, Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), Kiel, Vol. 13, Iss. 2019-8, pp. 1-27, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5018/economics-ejournal.ja.2019-8>, accessed 26 May 2021
- Council of Europe (2020): Shrinking space for civil society: its impact on young people and their organisations, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/shrinking-space#>, accessed 26 May 2021
- Deželan, Tomaž and Yurttaguler, Laden: Shrinking democratic civic space for youth; Study for EU-CoE youth partnership, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/59895423/TDLY_CSYP.pdf/cb8643c1-2707-0f1b-3f81-f13704dc9081
- Deželan, Tomaž; Sardoc, Mitja; Laker, Jason (2020): Safeguarding civic space for young people in Europe; published by: European Youth Forum, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342699432_SAFEGUARDING_CIVIC_SPACE_FOR_YOUNG_PEOPLE_IN_EUROPE, accessed 26th May 2021
- Enn, Ülli (2020): In distance but not apart – the case of COVID-19 crisis management in youth field in Estonia, <https://estonianworld.com/opinion/the-case-of-covid-19-crisis-management-in-youth-field-in-estonia/>
- European Center for Non-For-Profit Law: COVID-19 and Civic Freedoms in Europe in 2020, <https://ecnl.org/publications/covid-19-and-civic-freedoms-europe-2020>, accessed 26 May 2021
- European Civic Forum: Building knowledge and resilience for vibrant civic space in Europe, <https://civicspacewatch.eu/>, accessed 26 May 2021
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018): Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-challenges-facing-civil-society-summary_en.pdf, accessed 26 May 2021
- EU Directorate-General for external policies (2017): Shrinking space for civil society: the EU response, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO_STU\(2017\)578039_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO_STU(2017)578039_EN.pdf), accessed 26 May 2021

REFERENCES

- ▶ Holmes, Natalie (ed.) / Tactical Tech: Shrinking Civil Space: A Digital Perspective (no date available), <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civil-space-a-digital-perspective/>, accessed 26 May 2021
- ▶ Hummel, Siri (2020): Shrinking Spaces? Contested Spaces! Zum Paradox im zivilgesellschaftlichen Handlungsraum. 20/3 Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegung
- ▶ JUGEND für Europa (2021): Shrinking spaces for youth work!? – Challenges for post-democratic societies; brief, report, reader and concept paper of YOUTH In EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS #4 / 11-12 November 2020, <https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/YouthInEurope-OffenburgTalks/>
- ▶ Kivimäe, Anne; Žuravljova, Maria (2019): Discussing the digital age and youth work, https://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/66981/Digital_Age_and_Youth_Work_web.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- ▶ Lauha, Heikki and Nölvak, Kati (ed.) (2019): Digitalisation and youth work. Verke & EYWC, <https://www.verke.org/en/publications/digitalisation-and-youth-work/>
- ▶ Liberties and Greenpeace European Unit / Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties): Locking down critical voices – Rule of Law decline during the pandemic, <https://www.liberties.eu/en/news/liberties-greenpeace-civic-space-report/19629>, accessed 26 May 2021
- ▶ Maecenata-Institut: Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft 2021, <https://www.maecenata.eu/2021/04/26/vorstellung-des-4-atlas-der-zivilgesellschaft-2021/>
- ▶ Ohana, Yael (2020): What's politics got to do with it? European youth work programmes and the development of critical youth citizenship. Bonn: JUGEND für Europa, http://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/downloads/4-20-4143/FP_jfe-reader-special-b-10-200303.pdf

EXPERT FORUM

REFERENCES

- Pantea, Maria-Carmen: Young people's right to assemble peacefully. A mapping study, in preparation of the first review of the recommendation CM/Rec (2016)7 for EU-CoE youth partnership, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261815/Review+of+literature+Art+I.2_Pantea_final.pages/12a1929c-b031-22f2-bfc8-2b344154cdb0
- Potocnik, Dunja: Review of the documents on young people's access to rights and non-discrimination: A Desk Research Study for EU-CoE youth partnership, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261689/2021-Review-documents_access-to-rights_discrimination.pdf/b1d46a06-7707-3230-954e-97f62ac45475
- Siurala, Lasse (2020): YouthWork and TechLash - What are the new challenges of digitalisation for young people? Analytic Paper, Youth Partnership, European Commission and the Council of Europe, Brussels
- Siurala, Lasse (2021): Managing Digital Youth Work and its Risks, in: Moxon, Dan (chief editor): Young people, social inclusion and digitalisation, Emerging knowledge for practice and policy; Youth Knowledge Series #27, Council of Europe and European Commission Youth Partnership, Strasbourg
- Tactical Tech: Data Detox x Youth – an interactive workbook for high school students to take back control of their tech, <https://www.datadetoxkit.org/en/families/datadetox-x-youth> (in German: <https://www.datadetoxkit.org/de/families/datadetox-x-youth>)
- Tactical Tech: Shrinking Civil Space: A Digital Perspective, <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/shrinking-civilspace-a-digital-perspective/>

EXPERT FORUM