Chapter 6

The Transition to Adulthood

Thirty Years of Youth Work in Slovenia

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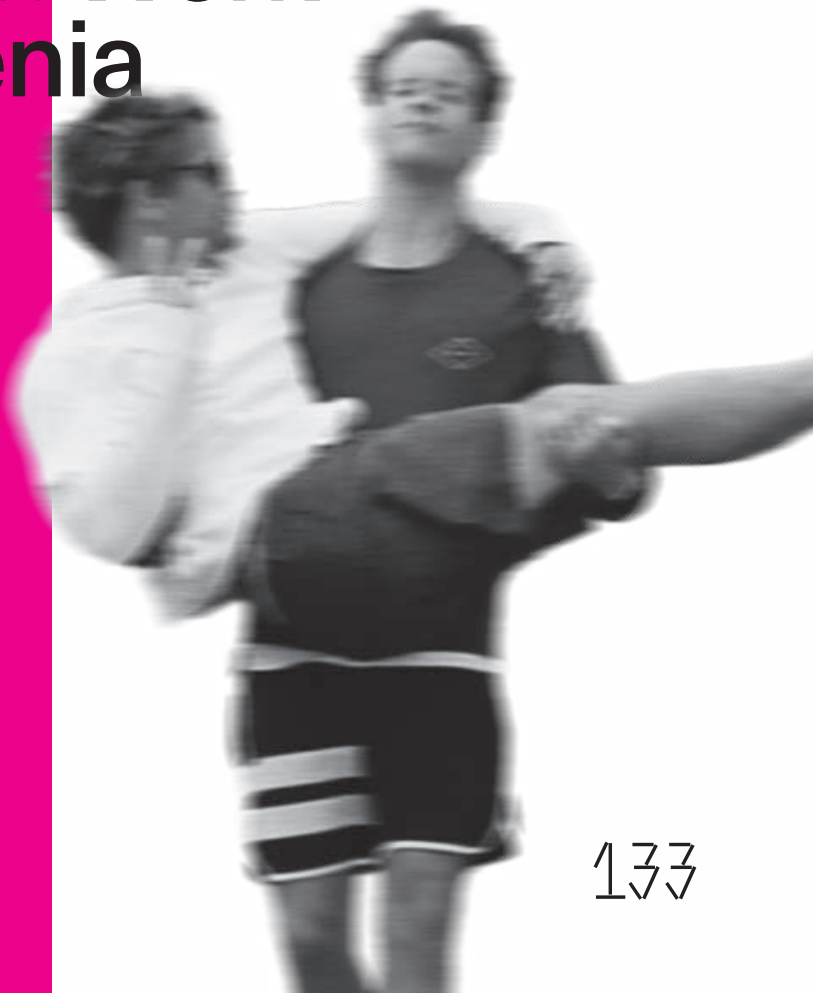


Key milestones in the development of youth work in Slovenia

1990: National Youth Council of Slovenia founded

2004: EU membership (Slovenia now a full beneficiary of European youth programmes)

2005: Strategy for Youth in the Field of Youth Policy Until 2010

2010: Council Resolution on Youth Work

2010: Public Interest in the Youth Sector Act

2013: Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022

2017: Catalogue of Standards for the Youth Worker NVQ published

2019: EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027

2020: Council Resolution on the Framework for Establishing a European Youth Work Agenda

Connecting young people and wider society: the importance, objectives and impacts of youth work

While the term 'youth work' (*mladinsko delo*) has been in common use in Slovenia for quite a few years, it took some time to gain wider currency after independence in 1991. This does not mean that youth work did not exist in the 1990s, but simply that it was called something else (Barbara Zupan, interview, 21 April 2021):[1]

> *In the 1990s we did not have a definition of youth work, but examples of good practice. However, these examples were voluntary work, youth brigades, youth policy work or social work with young people — that is to say, everything but youth work. It was only later that people began to think about what youth work could mean.*

Today the various definitions of youth work tend to settle on the idea that it connects young people, the local community and wider society, addresses the needs of young people, enables young people to have a voice, and equips young people with experiences, knowledge and skills. Alongside this, youth work is required to constantly develop and respond to social conditions and changes, with the main emphasis on adapting to the needs of young people in a given space at a given time. Above all, youth work is about encouraging young people to become involved in society as active citizens.

The objectives of youth work are connected to the personal development of the individual and to the establishment of social cohesion and development. The former involves promoting emancipation, empowerment, the development of responsibility, a cooperative spirit and the taking of initiative (Coburn, 2011; Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Lee, 1999; YouthLink Scotland, 2017), while the latter relates to fostering active participation, inclusion and a deeper understanding of social relations, challenges and problems, and to taking preventive action (ibid.). Youth work provides young people with the opportunity to engage in non-formal learning, test their knowledge in practice, and exert an influence on the community and society in which they live and work. In short, youth work encourages young people to form and express their own opinions and become active participants in society. 'Youth work is hence a process of learning, not only for young people, but also for society as such' (European Charter on Local Youth Work, 2019).

The target group addressed by youth work is, of course, young people. The Public Interest in the Youth Sector Act (Zakon o javnem interesu v mladinskem sektorju) defines young people as individuals aged between 15 and 29, and this age definition also forms the basis for measures and for the financing (and co-financing) of programmes and projects for young people at national and European level. As individuals within this age group, young people are a diverse group with different interests and needs. Whether the target group comprises all young people or a specific subset thereof depends on the activity or the youth work organisation involved. Youth organisations' vision and mission statements often address the challenges faced by specific groups of young people, or the specific challenges highlighted by the funders of youth work. The Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022 (Resolucija o Nacionalnem programu za mladino 2013–2022) places particular emphasis on young people with fewer opportunities, including opportunities relating to youth work.

1 Source available from the authors (the same applies to all interviews).

Suitable premises, in all places or environments in which young people live, are vital for the proper delivery of youth work. Youth work addresses the needs, wishes and challenges of young people in ways that the formal education system and other organisations are unable to do — and in many cases do not know how to do. In other words, spaces in which youth work can be carried out should be available to all young people regardless of where they live. However, the way existing infrastructure is distributed around the country means that some young people have many more opportunities to spend time at youth centres or other youth organisations than others; indeed, some have no such opportunities at all because of where they live. Figures from the *Mladina 2020* (Youth 2020) study show that 44.2% of young people never visit youth centres, student clubs or other similar places, and a further 30% visit them less than once a month. For the purposes of comparison, just over two-thirds (67.2%) of young people spend free time at shopping centres at least once a month (some figures suggest that Slovenia has the highest number of square metres of shopping centre per capita in the world). In answer to the question of how many opportunities there are for cultural activities in youth centres and similar places where they live, just over a third of young people say 'too few' (*Mladina 2020*). These findings suggest that accessible local infrastructure is an important factor in dictating where young people spend their free time.

Youth work responds to the needs of individuals and the wider social reality, as its practice tends to reflect. Being based on the principles of voluntary participation, and given that it is organised and delivered in collaboration with young people (and, on occasions, entirely by young people themselves), youth work contributes to young people's personal and social development, encourages young people to think critically about and participate actively in the world around them, and is based on accessibility, equality and empowerment (Lee, 1999; Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Gormally and Coburn, 2014; YouthLink Scotland, 2014; Edinburgh Youth Work Consortium, 2015; Brady et al., 2016; de St Croix, 2019; European Charter on Local Youth Work, 2019). Youth work is a set of pre-planned activities with defined educational objectives that are achieved through methods of non-formal and informal learning (ibid.), and comprises methodologically and substantively diverse structured and unstructured activities (Brady et al., 2016; Brady and Redmond, 2017). At both local and national level, youth work is an important space in which young people receive information and advice (Devlin and Gunning, 2009), and support in resolving personal issues (Dunne et al., 2014).

Youth work brings young people and the local community together, has positive effects on individuals and the community alike (Williamson, 2017), serves as a link between young people, educational institutions and the local community, and promotes the development of (young) individuals and of the local community in general (Baizerman, 1996; Devlin and Gunning, 2009; YouthLink Scotland, 2017). It also provides a space in which different social groups can meet, as it fosters a plurality of activities involving young people, other individuals and groups from the local community. These activities can be connected to culture, sport, personal and/or social development, environmental protection, enterprise, social engagement, and take place in spaces that provide an inclusive, safe and stimulating environment in which young people can develop into responsible and active citizens through structured activities; they therefore provide opportunities for the social and economic problems that arise in the local community to be resolved (Idecon, 2012). Supporting youth work therefore

means encouraging young people to become actively involved in co-creating their local and wider environment, where 'organisations involved in youth work should be treated as partners in a civil dialogue that addresses young people and the community' (Deželan and Vombergar, 2019).

Youth work is an area that has an impact on the young people involved in it, and on the community and society of which those young people are part. The impacts of youth work are varied and diverse, in line with the variety and diversity of the areas with which it is involved. It also reaches different target groups, from young people generally to specific groups of young people. We can identify the impacts of youth work at the level of the individual (i.e. on their personal characteristics and professional development) and at the level of society, which is reflected in the development of the community and wider society as well as in economic development (Lee, 1999; Devlin and Gunning, 2009; Dunne et al., 2014; Gormally and Coburn, 2014; Williamson, 2017; YouthLink Scotland, 2017; Zubulake, 2017; Lardier et al., 2018). As far as the impacts on individuals' personal characteristics are concerned, these can emerge in the form of increased self-confidence, improved self-image and a more optimistic outlook, more successful and satisfying personal (formal and informal) and social relationships, the acquisition of experiences that lead to a more reasonable judgement and assessment of and greater control over one's own life, and improved health as a result of being better informed about healthy lifestyles and the dangers of substance abuse (ibid.). The positive effects on an individual's professional characteristics come mainly in the form of the acquisition of knowledge and skills through formal learning processes, the ability to work effectively within groups, improved formal educational outcomes, and greater employability (ibid.).

Youth work also has a direct (positive) impact on the community in the form of more active participation by young people in the community and society generally, a commitment on the part of young people to solidarity (including inter-generational solidarity), an inclusive society and the equality of different social groups, increased feelings of security, the strengthening of interpersonal relationships at the personal and community level, and lower rates of substance abuse among young people (Lee, 1999; Strycharczyk et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2016; YouthLink Scotland, 2017). With respect to the impacts on the economy, Idecon (2012) and Minton (2017) point out that youth work creates new jobs, improves local services, works preventively to reduce legal, healthcare and social security costs, and brings youth organisations, schools, local communities and private sector organisations together through various programmes.

Institutional framework and the funding of youth work in Slovenia

Youth work began to develop in conceptual terms in the 1990s. The National Youth Council of Slovenia (Mladinski svet Slovenije, MSS) was set up in 1990, immediately after independence; this was followed a year later by the Office for Youth (Urad RS za mladino, URSM), located within the Ministry of Education and Sport. Initiatives to devise a youth programme soon arose at national and European level, while local youth work began to develop through youth organisations and youth centres. With Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004, the youth programmes that had been created by the Office for Youth were joined by European youth programmes. The breakthrough for youth work in Slovenia came in 2005 with the publication by

the Office of a five-year youth policy strategy designed to improve the conditions for the performance of youth work and raise its profile (Pazlar, 2009, 21–22); prior to that, youth work had developed through the interaction of practices of youth projects from the period prior to independence, adapting to new conditions and the actual needs of young people as it went along. It was, in the words of the Office's Strategy for Youth in the Field of Youth Policy of 2005, 'ahead of the theory', which was still the case in youth work at the time. In that document, the Office also noted that 'the Slovenian youth field operates somewhat under the influence of activist enthusiasm, pioneering work and charismatic figures on the scene' (Office for Youth, 2005).

In the 2010 Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, Meeting within the Council, youth work was recognised as organised work

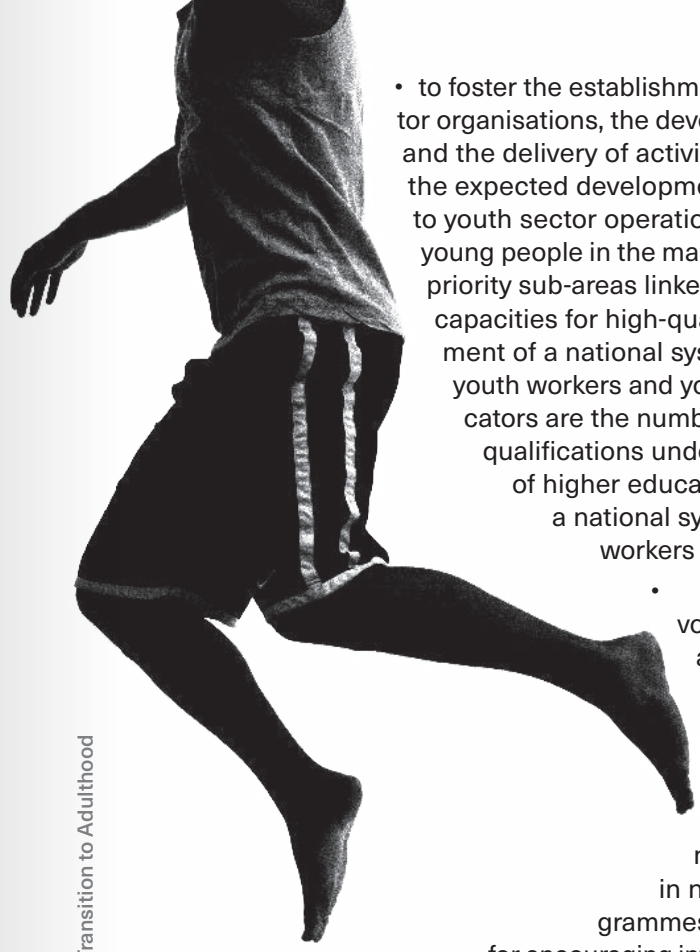
> *covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people … [It] takes place in the extra-curricular area, as well as through specific leisure-time activities, and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes and on voluntary participation. These activities and processes are self-managed, co-managed or managed under educational or pedagogical guidance by either professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders […]* (Council of the European Union, 2010).

The Public Interest in the Youth Sector Act from 2010, which provided the legal basis for the drafting of the Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022, facilitated the further development of youth work, as well as the expansion of the youth sector in Slovenia, while the growth in funds earmarked for youth centres helped to strengthen youth work at national and local level. It provided the first legal definition of youth work in Slovenia, referring to it as:

> *an organised and targeted form of activity by and for young people within which they contribute, through their own efforts, to their inclusion in society, bolster their skills and help the community to develop. The delivery of various forms of youth work is based on the voluntary participation of young people regardless of their interests, their cultural affiliations, their world view or their politics.*

This definition has given rise to a variety of others — indeed, there are almost as many definitions today as there are organisations whose activities touch upon the field of youth work. Nevertheless, these differing interpretations of the term do have several points in common: 'learning experiences' within non-formal education, a 'planned process' with expected outcomes, 'active participation' that encourages young people to take a more active part in society, and 'personal and social development' of the young people who are involved in and shaped by the youth work process, for example (Beočanin, 2011, 51–52).

Slovenia does not have a separate youth work strategy, although the legal framework being provided by the Public Interest in the Youth Sector Act. As that law sets out, the Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022 is the basic programming document defining the priorities and measures within the youth sector. It does not contain a separate section on youth work, which is incorporated into the section titled 'Young people, society and the importance of the youth sector'. The aims of the Resolution as they relate to youth work are:



- to foster the establishment and development of youth sector organisations, the development of key youth sector fields and the delivery of activities for non-organised youth, with the expected development outcome being improvements to youth sector operations and increased participation by young people in the management of social affairs. The two priority sub-areas linked to youth work are the creation of capacities for high-quality youth work and the establishment of a national system of education and training for youth workers and youth leaders. The two relevant indicators are the number of people gaining youth worker qualifications under education programmes or parts of higher education programmes (by gender), and a national system of training in place for youth workers and youth leaders;
- to encourage and strengthen involvement in international youth work and learning mobility in youth work, with the expected development outcome being an increase in the mobility of young people within the youth sector. The indicators connected to youth work are: the number of young people involved in non-formal education mobility programmes; the number of national schemes for encouraging international cooperation in the youth sector and learning mobility in youth work with individual countries or individual target groups of young people; the number of programmes for encouraging local units to become involved in international youth work and the delivery of learning mobility by national youth organisations; the number of international youth work training activities taking place in Slovenia; and the number of youth leaders and workers taking part in such training programmes, whether in Slovenia or abroad, in any given year;
- to bolster youth research and analysis, with the expected development outcome being the provision of long-term and stable youth research. Within the priority sub-area, which presupposes the establishment of a national youth research organisation, there is also an indicator relating to the number of analyses and research studies that examine and evaluate the impact of international youth work and learning mobility in youth work;
- to improve young people's skillsets, with the expected development outcome being easier access to the labour market for young people. One of the priority sub-areas relates to the establishment of comprehensive recognition of non-formal forms of knowledge and experience, and the integration of formal and non-formal education. The indicators in this priority sub-area are: the placing of the issue of the non-recognition of knowledge and skills acquired in non-formal settings on the agenda of political decision-makers; the introduction of youth worker and youth

leader status in secondary and higher education (along the lines of the status awarded to athletes and cultural workers in Slovenia); and active participation in youth sector organisations as part of compulsory elective subjects at school.

The draft new Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2023–32 mentions youth work in the 'Youth and society' section. Among other things the objectives of youth work reflect the sector's efforts to develop high-quality youth work within the Bonn Process, the aim of which is to implement the European Youth Work Agenda. Those objectives are:

- to promote and develop quality in youth work, with the expected development outcome being that young people acquire additional skills by taking part in high-quality youth work. As part of this objective, research is planned on the impacts of youth work, the setting of quality standards in youth work, the establishment of a system for drawing up records of activities and the monitoring of the impacts of youth work;
- to recognise and acknowledge youth work, with the expected development outcome being the promotion of the benefits of youth work. The activities and measures envisaged include informing the public about youth work projects and activities through the media, encouraging local communities to invest in youth work programmes, encouraging youth sector organisations and schools to work together, and publicising the national vocational qualification for youth workers more widely;
- to consolidate the funding of youth work programmes, with the expected development outcome being increased investment in those programmes, which will enable more young people to take part in the design, delivery and evaluation of youth work.
- To aid implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda, a national expert working group was set up and tasked with raising the quality and profile of youth work (Državna strokovna delovna skupina za dvig kakovosti in prepoznavnosti mladinskega dela). It drafted a strategic plan for 2022–2027/32, and coordinated it with youth sector organisations. The overall objectives of the strategic plan are:
- to improve and develop quality in youth work, with an eye on ensuring a consistent understanding of quality in youth work based on a community of practice and the framework set out in the final Declaration of the Third European Youth Work Convention. Quality in youth work should also be defined as an objective in the National Youth Programme. A further aim is to provide a clear description of the impacts of youth work, using that as a basis for establishing criteria and standards for the delivery and monitoring of youth work, and a unified, free-of-charge system for recording activities and monitoring the impacts of youth work. The objective also envisages the organisation of education and training on this topic, and seeks to secure an environment that supports the delivery of high-quality youth work at national and local level, and to monitor the quality and boost the profile of youth work;
- to raise the profile and enhance the identity of youth work through efforts to increase the visibility of youth organisations and youth work programmes among young people and the participation of young people in youth work. A further aim is to ensure that formal education recognises the added value gained by linking up with youth work, and to communicate the impacts of youth work to different stakeholders. There is also a focus on efforts to recognise the value of and

support for youth work by the private sector. Youth work should be recognised by decision-makers as distinct from other (albeit similar) areas, and efforts should be made to empower youth workers and organisations to present the impacts of youth work and emphasise the value of the youth work profession.

The Office for Youth has funded youth work and youth work programmes through public co-financing calls since it was founded in 1991. The amounts available have fluctuated over the years, increasing from EUR 1.36 million in 2007 to EUR 1.42 million in 2010, for example, before falling to its lowest level in 15 years in 2014 (when only EUR 1.01 million was allocated to youth work). Since 2015, public calls have been published every two years rather than annually (2016/17, 2018/19, 2020/21, 2022/23 and 2024/25), with the funds available once again gradually increasing. The 2016/17 call allocated EUR 1.2 million to youth work, and the calls for 2018/2019 and 2020/21 EUR 2.9 million (i.e. EUR 1.45 million for each year). This is comparable to the annual funds allocated to youth work a decade ago. Funds rose again in the 2022/23 call, to EUR 1.925 million a year (EUR 3.83 million over two years). The current call (2024/25) proposes to allocate a total of EUR 3.68 million, or EUR 1.84 million a year, to youth work.

Since 2007 the number of applications to public calls by national youth organisations has, in most cases, matched the number of national youth organisation programmes financed; over this period, between 11 and 14 national youth organisations have applied to the call, with only two of them failing to obtain funds. The highest average amount of funding received in this period was EUR 24,167 (2015) and the lowest was EUR 13,846 (2008). The number of applications to calls by youth centres has fluctuated between 52 and 70 since 2007. All applicants were successful in 2010, although selection was at its highest in 2012. The highest average amount of funding received in this period was EUR 11,895 (2007) and the lowest was EUR 9,737 (2014). In the last five calls, the following totals have been allocated to all youth work programmes together: EUR 2.40 million in 2016/17, EUR 2.90 million in 2018/19, EUR 2.88 million in 2020/21, EUR 3.79 million in 2022/23 and EUR 3.66 million in 2024/25. At the end of 2023, the Office for Youth also published a public call, 'Z mladinskim delom proti prekarnosti mladih', which focuses on training youth workers to address the issue of precarity, providing young people, youth sector organisations and the public with information on precarity in the youth population, raising awareness of the importance of work-related and social rights, and giving advice and support to young people. The plan involves 400 youth workers and at least 6,630 young people. The call is being held as part of the European Cohesion Policy Programme 2021–2027 in Slovenia.

Other significant opportunities for the funding of youth work are available at European level, for example via Erasmus+: Youth and European Solidarity Corps calls, the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. There is no systematic data available on how much public funding is allocated to youth work in local communities, municipalities or nationally. The system of channelling funds directly to selected organisations via the Office for Youth and allocating European funds via national agencies does bring certain risks. Funds are given to organisations that have become proficient at writing applications to calls of this type; they do not necessarily reach organisations that are capable of carrying out high-quality youth work, particularly in areas where young people do not have as many opportunities, but are perhaps less skilled at writing applications. In other words, young people should be

entitled, in all local contexts, to become involved in (local) youth work, meaning that a comparable share of funding must be provided for young people in every municipality. Youth worker Jurij Šarman believes that municipalities could then allocate funds for youth work to local organisations that deliver youth work programmes: 'The transfer of European and national funds to the local level is essential. I see a big opportunity for the state, together with municipalities, to amend the Local Self-Government Act and make youth work a compulsory task of municipalities. Youth work takes place in the local environment. So money needs to come to that environment' (interview, 14 April 2021).

This also raises the question of who is entitled to funding via the Office for Youth's public calls. Calls are currently open to youth councils, youth centres, and youth and other organisations; and this wide range of eligible beneficiaries and the limited funding available means that there is a lack of funding for youth work per se. Šarman believes that funding is spread too thinly and, moreover, that the eligibility of youth councils presents something of a dilemma (ibid.):

> *Policy in youth councils is mainly led by member organisations that are youth wings of political parties. There is an issue here of double funding, as I believe that youth wings should be funded through the Political Parties Act and not through this public call. However, the Youth Councils Act allows this funding. We have made a basic error here [in Slovenia] by failing to separate local youth councils and the National Youth Council from other youth organisations* [ibid.].

Professional youth work and the quality of youth work

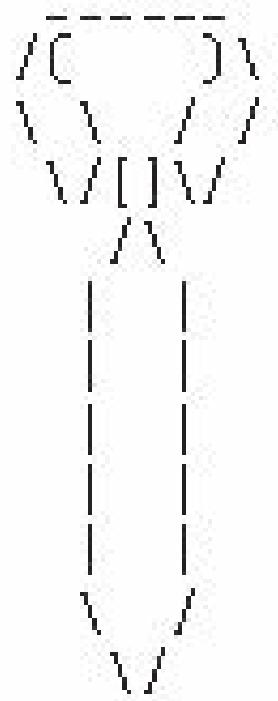
Youth workers bring together young people, the local community and educational institutions (Baldridge, 2018), promoting and amplifying the voices of young people in the local community, attempting to create opportunities for young people to become joint decision-makers within their community, and encouraging young people to take a proactive approach to their community and to society as a whole. Youth workers have a variety of profiles that correspond to the various forms that youth work can take.

Slovenia still does not have publicly accredited education or training programmes for the profession of youth worker, although individuals have been able to obtain a national vocational qualification (NVQ) for youth workers since 2017. The vocational standard was adopted by the Expert Council for Vocational and Professional Education (Strokovni svet RS za poklicno in strokovno izobraževanje) in 2016, thereby recognising youth worker as an official profession. The certificate awarded via the NVQ is recognised at European level, and quite a high number of education and training programmes are organised, mainly by national (youth) organisations, to further the development of youth workers' knowledge and skills. While youth workers can, with the help of different tools, place the skills and competencies they have acquired through their youth work 'on the record', there is still no national mechanism for recognising them. As Šarman argues: 'We have managed to get a national qualification for youth worker. On the one hand, this is fine, although I don't see that it brings any added value to the youth sector in this area. It would be better to have a strong, concrete programme at faculty level' [ibid.].

Youth workers in Slovenia can carry out their work either in the form of employment or as volunteers. Volunteers are frequently defined as 'youth leaders', and generally differ from professional youth workers because they have acquired their knowledge

(exclusively) through non-formal education. Youth leaders also generally operate within youth organisations, i.e. organisations founded at the initiative of young people themselves, while professional youth workers (also) work within organisations for young people, i.e. organisations created by adults in response to the needs of young people within society. Moreover, youth leaders are generally involved in the management of youth projects and young people, while professional youth workers tend to be involved in the coordination of programmes for young people as well (Beočanin, 2011, 66).

High-quality youth work must have a clear and comprehensive system for measuring impacts and recording results. According to the European Charter on Local Youth Work of 2019, the 'quality development of local youth work' needs 'regular and up to date mappings of local realities and needs', 'a clear and comprehensive system for documentation and follow up of outcomes', 'clear procedures for continuous updates on new national and international research, trends and methods in the field of youth and youth work' and, not least, 'continuous competence development of youth workers based on a clear competency framework' (European Charter on Local Youth Work, 2019). Only if youth work is of high quality can it have a positive impact on the development of young people and the local communities in which it is carried out (Brady and Redmond, 2017; Brennan et al., 2007; Devlin and Gunning, 2009). The establishment, maintenance and improvement of quality in youth work is only possible with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders: national governments, youth work providers, research institutions, educators and so on (European Commission, 2015, 15). The principles of (quality) youth work include: inclusivity and responsiveness to the needs, interests and experiences of young people; voluntary and active participation, engagement and responsibility; a holistic understanding of young people as capable individuals; the enhancement of young people's rights and the empowerment of young people; the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of activities together with young people; a focus on non-formal and informal learning; and clear learning objectives that are relevant to the young people participating (European Commission, 2015; Agdur, 2017).

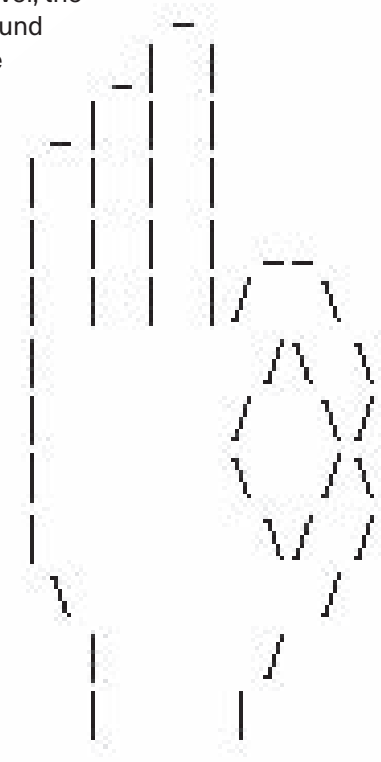


Slovenia has still not formulated quality standards for youth work, even though this is one of the objectives of the Strategic Plan for the Implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda in Slovenia up to 2027/2032. Public calls for the co-funding of youth work are already designed to secure funding for high-quality programmes, with a youth organisation being entitled to apply for funding if it has acquired the status of an organisation operating in the public interest in the youth sector. This status requires an organisation to reflect on its vision two years in advance, which encourages it to formulate and pursue a mission.

Research on quality youth work and the support environment for its delivery (Deželan and Vombergar, 2023) has shown that representatives of organisations that carry out youth work in Slovenia largely understand quality youth work to be that

which establishes a support environment to aid the empowerment and development of young people. At the same time, it must, in those authors' opinion, address young people directly and respond to their needs, wishes and problems, employ tools to record the impacts, respond to the social reality, and follow the principle of 'working with young people for young people'. They also stress that, if quality youth work is to be secured, youth workers must be provided with non-precarious or less precarious forms of employment, undergo continuous training, and have adequate spatial and infrastructural opportunities in which to carry out their work. The process of commodification, at play in this field as in others, is also having an impact on quality in youth work. Tin Kampl points out that many people are convinced that 'some [organisations] are increasingly providing youth work as a service with a corresponding less process-based approach' (interview, 19 May 2021). However, the purpose of a youth organisation should not be to provide ad hoc services or products, but to attempt to realise a long-term vision. This is easier to achieve for organisations that have a specific mission and a regular funding stream (e.g. the membership fees received by scouting organisations), while organisations that do not have such resources are, as it currently stands, mainly dependent on project-based financing, which means that they are obliged to adapt to the areas of focus of each individual call for applications. They are also often forced to adapt their mission by the requirements of those of their users who wish to use the education and training on offer to acquire specific youth work-related knowledge or skills, but who have no serious desire to remain involved in the organisation over the longer term.

The quality of youth work therefore depends considerably on the level of engagement of individual organisations, and on the integration and exchange of knowledge and experience between them. An important role is played here by the National Youth Council and the MaMa Youth Network (Mladinska mreža MaMa), which work to secure the ongoing development of youth work by organising events, education and training for youth workers with the aim of addressing the challenges that their member organisations have in common. In the 1990s, as the umbrella association of youth organisations at national level, the National Youth Council took part in key discussions around the formation of the youth sector, and introduced the term 'youth work' into the country on the basis of good practices abroad. By publishing manuals for youth workers and developing a pool of trainers, it helped lay the theoretical and practical foundations for the exchange of knowledge in the field. It set up the first training programmes that focused on quality in youth work, and made the establishment of high-quality youth work one of its core missions. It also acted as a basic link between organisations in this field (National Youth Council, n.d.). New organisations with the same mission began to appear subsequently, perhaps the most visible of them being the MaMa Youth Network, which was founded at the initiative of local youth centres. MaMa is a national (non-governmental) network of 50 youth



centres from different parts of the country that provides mutual support and a space in which knowledge and experience in addressing the needs of young people can be shared. Its mission is twofold: to place young people to the fore by promoting their active participation in society, and to improve the quality of youth work (MaMa Youth Network, n.d.). Maja Hostnik identifies human capital as the most important element of quality in youth work, but believes that the state is still not investing enough in it (interview, 19 May 2021):

> *There is no concerted effort at national level to improve the quality and development of youth work. The biggest capacities in the sector are human capital, and nothing has been done on this for the last 15 years, or even more. You need to invest in and train staff. We have a lot of Erasmus+ trainings, but that's training for international youth work. What about the national, the micro environment?*

Overview of the main themes relating to youth work

In practice, youth work means 'work by young people for young people or work to the benefit of young people' (Beočanin, 2011, 51). The practice of youth work needs to be set up in dialogue with youth and other stakeholders, transform aims and objectives into strategies and plans, define the preconditions needed for carrying out quality youth work, exchange information about activities and experiences at local, sectoral, national and transnational level, primarily inform, stimulate and support young people, and evaluate and ensure the visibility of outcomes (European Charter on Local Youth Work, 2019). The Office for Youth is the most prominent national body involved in planning, organising and carrying out measures in the field of youth work in Slovenia; it also supports these measures financially through public calls for the co-financing of youth work programmes. An analysis of the priorities and areas of focus of the public calls published by the Office (initially every year, but more recently every two years) gives us an indication of how some of the best-supported topics within youth work have developed over the years. The priorities of individual years have tended to be connected to national as well as international (European) social contexts and the public policy campaigns current in the year or period in question.

The focus in 2007 was on the Council of Europe's 'All Different – All Equal' European Youth Campaign for Diversity, Human Rights and Participation; this was joined the following year by a focus on the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, which featured themes relating to intercultural dialogue between young people and to promoting the participation of young people with fewer opportunities. In 2009 the call prioritised the active participation of young people, youth information and counselling, youth voluntary work, the recognition and evaluation of non-formal and informal learning, youth mobility and youth research. Equal opportunities for and the social inclusion of young people, international youth work, a deeper understanding of young people, and health and well-being were the priority areas in 2010, followed a year later by a continuation of voluntary youth activities and the European Voluntary Service, transnational cooperation projects and participation in the European Year of Volunteering. The European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations was a new area of focus for 2012, alongside Structured Dialogue with young people.

In 2013 priority was given to the employability of young people (in response to the economic and financial crisis), although the call also focused on Structured Dialogue

and active citizenship as part of the European Year of Citizens. In addition to employability and Structured Dialogue, the focus of the 2014 call was on programmes that addressed themes relating to the work of the European No Hate Speech Movement. Areas that contributed to the achievement of the goals of the 'Youth and society' section of the Resolution on the National Youth Programme 2013–2022 were also highlighted as priorities. In 2015 the call prioritised international volunteering projects co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme (European Voluntary Service, international youth exchanges, etc.) within the context of youth volunteering, while also maintaining focus on achieving the objectives of the 'Youth and society' section. The first two-year public call (2016/2017) prioritised the response to the refugee crisis, but also continued to focus on the achievement of the goals of the 'Youth and society' section of the National Youth Programme (as did the 2018/2019 call), while the 2020/2021 call was mainly concerned with responding to the topics of hate speech, radicalisation and the integration of young people not in education or employment (NEETs), and climate and environmental challenges in line with the premises laid down by the European Commission (the focus on the achievement of the goals of the 'Youth and society' section was also maintained). The 2022 call, for the co-financing of youth work programmes in 2022 and 2023, maintained the focus on the 'Youth and society' section of the National Youth Programme (whose period of validity ended in 2023) while also looking towards ensuring equal opportunities for participation in society, particularly for young people with fewer opportunities, and activities that are beneficial to society and constitute a response to the most pressing issues (e.g. hate speech, radicalisation of young people, integration of NEETs, etc.). The most recent calls (for 2024/25) add climate challenges to the topics highlighted in the previous call.

Since 2014 the Office for Youth's public calls for the co-financing of youth work programmes have been closely tied to the 'Youth and society' section of the National Youth Programme, which indicates a very clear awareness of the importance of public calls to the implementation of that programme, particularly when vertical youth policy is involved. Promoting the participation and representation of young women and men, the establishment and development of organisations in the youth sector and the development of key youth sector fields, providing conditions for the operation of non-organised youth, encouraging and strengthening involvement in international youth work and learning mobility in the youth sector, and promoting voluntary work among young people: all these topics have acquired a clear financial instrument, despite having already appeared as relevant topics in earlier calls. The priorities and areas of focus that have emerged in specific calls for the co-funding of youth work have played a significant role in formulating (and restricting) the operations of organisations involved in youth work, as those operations are heavily dependent on public funding. This coincides with the finding that if youth work used to be 'directed primarily towards young people's leisure activities, it has more recently become subject mainly to the need to respond either to the problems of individuals or to the problems of society' (Tea Jarc, interview, 20 April 2021), with sufficient funds being required for a high-quality approach to these issues. The thematic focus of public calls reflects a desire on the part of the Office for Youth for youth work to make a social intervention; during the major economic crisis, for example, youth work was mainly concerned with youth employment and employability. In Peter Debeljak's opinion, this was the central and key issue facing young people, and one that had to take precedence over other unresolved youth-related issues — issues that could be more easily addressed only

if young people had jobs. Debeljak says that 'if we have a good employment policy, then there is no need for a particular housing policy' (interview, 10 May 2021). He therefore identifies, within youth work, a systemic mechanism that addresses the major challenges that young people face, which in turn entails the transfer of the systemic problems of young people to youth work. Many see this as a problem, as they believe that the resolution of systemic problems is neither the core mission of youth work nor the primary task of the youth sector. Tea Jarc points out (interview 20 April 2021) that during the period of crisis

> *[...] many institutions, not only in Slovenia but chiefly at European level, imposed responsibility for resolving youth unemployment on youth organisations and, of course, made this conditional upon receiving funds. This meant that the focus of many organisations that had previously not dealt with this topic at all changed, simply because this was the only way they could get funding. Of course, youth work should address the challenges of society and the needs of young people to a certain extent. But changing its mission because there are no adequate national policies, and shifting this responsibility for saving their peers onto young volunteers, is absurd. While youth work can also involve itself in policy development, responsibility for that cannot fall entirely on its shoulders.*

Maja Hostnik takes a similar view of the development of youth work outlined above (interview, 19 May 2021):

> *In the last few years, all projects have been based on the conviction that we have to train young people for employment — that they find a job as quickly as possible. This has turned us away significantly from the focus and core mission of youth work. We carried out a lot of training programmes, but this was not backed up by concrete practice. Those responsible for publishing funding calls and giving out these projects are thinking in the wrong direction. More consideration needs to be given in future to the acquisition of skills and competencies by young people, not only through theoretical training but also through practice.*

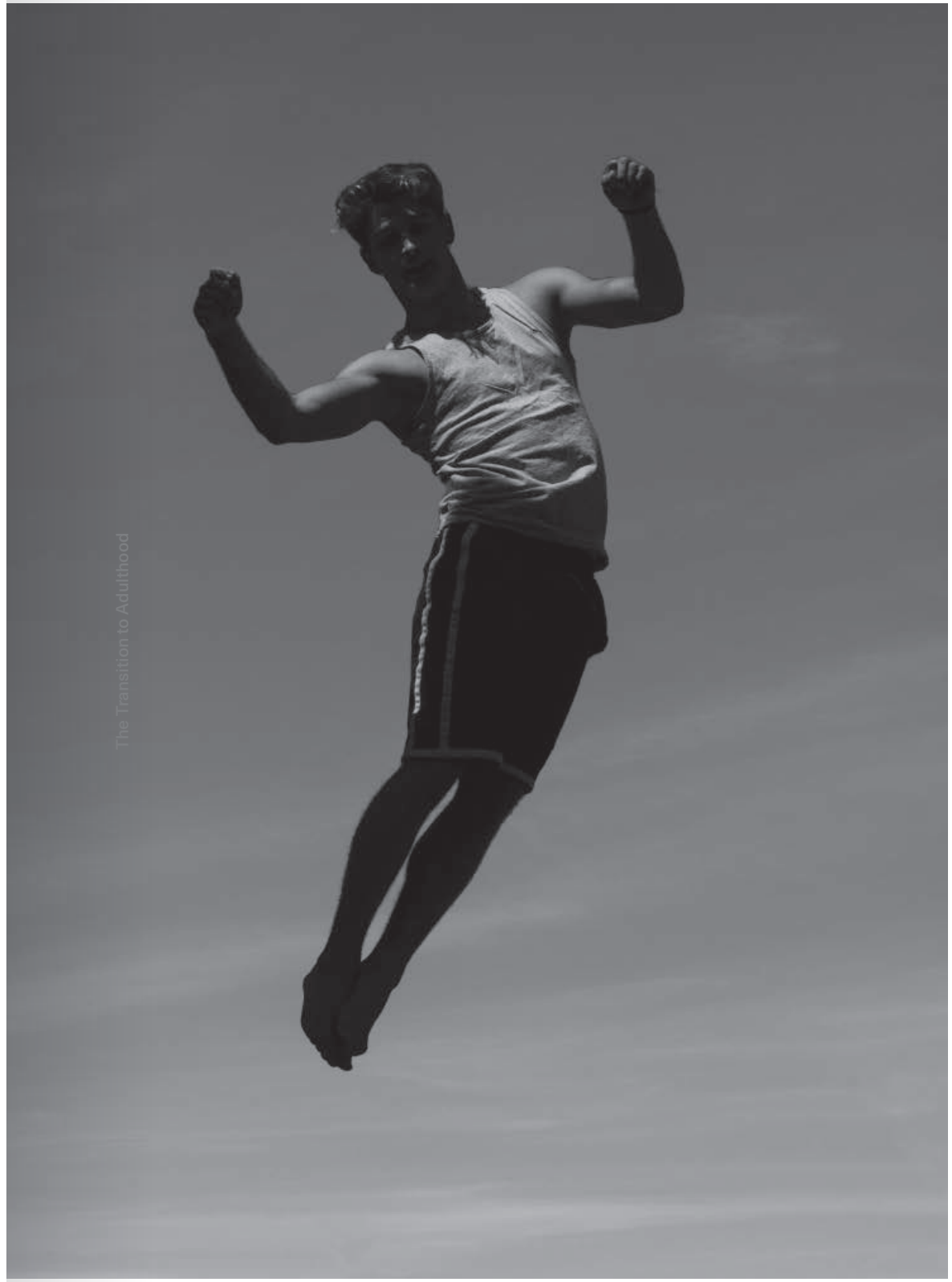
Current debates around the digital and green transitions are also foreshadowing trends in youth work towards digital transformation and environmental protection. In addition to a strong emphasis on digital youth work, a significant shift towards young people's mental health can be expected as a result of the situation caused or exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. As far as debates around the long-term trends in youth work are concerned, Barbara Zupan points out that 'participation' and 'youth dialogue' will become increasingly important topics within youth work: 'It is time for citizens to become aware of their rights and responsibilities, including the fact that their active participation is required in things that should lead to certain social changes' (interview, 21 April 2021).

Challenges of youth work in Slovenia

'There will never be a shortage of challenges in youth work' (Barbara Zupan, interview, 21 April 2021)

The Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting Within the Council on the Framework for Establishing a European Youth Work Agenda, which was adopted in 2020, highlights the challenges faced by youth work in Europe. One of these challenges remains the need for a common definition of what youth work is — in reality, the need for a common conceptual framework. It also highlights the importance of creating spaces for the delivery of youth work that are safe, accessible, open and autonomous, and this is indeed one of the main challenges in Slovenia as well. Representatives of youth work organisations highlight the fact that the premises in which they work are often cramped and unsuitable (with excessively high monthly maintenance costs), and do not allow varied activities to be carried out, or more than one activity at a time. They also highlight the major issue of securing the necessary equipment; in their experience, there is no suitable funding call that would allow the necessary or even basic equipment required for the delivery of youth work to be purchased (furniture, computers and the like). They point out that most of the equipment they use is donated or brought from home (Deželan and Vombergar, 2023). The reasons for the underdevelopment of youth work in Slovenia, in terms of premises and infrastructure, can be found in the low profile of that work and, more specifically, in a general lack of awareness of the positive effects it has on social life. Jurij Šarman puts this down to 'a tendency [in Slovenia] not to perceive youth work as important to the life of the local community' (interview, 14 April 2021).

The Council Resolution also points out that sufficient resources must be secured for the education and training of youth workers, which is a precondition for the delivery of high-quality youth work. In common with other specialised fields, youth work requires continuous staff development, particularly where it deals with current social issues; otherwise professional knowledge gradually stagnates, and becomes outdated and incapable of responding swiftly to young people's problems. If youth work is to be of a sufficiently high standard, investments must be made in research and development, and 'research should be carried out [...] but without creating unnecessary bureaucratic burden' (Council of the European Union, 2020), since only a data-led policy of bolstering youth work, either by studying the challenges faced by young people or by aiding the professional development of youth workers, will lead to the effective recognition and strengthening of that work. A further major challenge for youth work, in Europe generally and in Slovenia in particular, is cooperation between 'youth work providers and youth policy makers' and 'sustainable structures' (Council of the European Union, 2020), which subsequently feeds into problems relating to the funding of youth work. In Slovenia, organisations are often entirely dependent on project-based funding; indeed, according to Uroš Skrinar, this type of funding is 'frequently the only way that youth organisations can survive' (interview, 6 May 2021). It is a preservation tactic that means that youth organisations are forced to neglect their core mission. As they become increasingly performance-oriented (e.g. by having to deal constantly with HR matters), they are nudged further and further away from some of the fundamental principles of youth work. Representatives of youth centres and other youth work NGOs say that their operations are funded from a wide variety of sources: the EU, via the Erasmus+: Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes



(up to 90%), local community funds (10–50%), the Office for Youth (5–10 %), calls for applications published by other ministries, and their own funds. Most organisations drawn on funds from all the above sources, and funding is mostly project-based and therefore only available for a limited amount of time (Deželan and Vombergar, 2023).

The method by which funding is allocated is also far from ideal. Šarman points out that 'if funding remains as it is, local youth work will not develop' (interview 14 April 2021). Given that youth work is always primarily local in character, he believes that it would make sense to involve local authorities more closely in the allocation of funding by allowing them to receive central government funds for young people on the basis of various set indicators, including the number of young people in their municipality. In his opinion, the current method of allocation heavily favours those organisations that know how to access funds and are proficient in doing so; it is not necessarily tied to the quality of the youth work they carry out in practice. Of course, we need to remind ourselves that the professionalisation of one field often leads to the professionalisation of others, and that such indicators can be biased. Some local authorities, for example, might have strongly developed services for young people outside of youth work, which means that even with larger numbers of young people, the pressure on youth work itself is not so great. The fact remains, however, that making the funding allocation process more local would bring that process closer to the local specifics of youth work in those environments, implicitly rendering it more effective. Considerations of this type are not new: indeed, when it was drawing up the Strategy for Youth in the Field of Youth Policy Until 2010 nearly 20 years ago, the Office for Youth recognised that

> *[...] activities at local level [...] are increasingly dependent on funding strategies based on the 'top down' principle, which makes it impossible to plan for the long term and, in turn, leads to a fall in motivation, and hampers serious long-term planning and the continuity of operation of youth work. From the point of view of ensuring high-quality youth work in Slovenia over the long term, this is in no way a promising situation* (Office for Youth, 2005).

This challenge has long been acknowledged by political decision-makers and youth work providers alike. It appears that all that is needed is a common will among key stakeholders to regulate this field in a way that pays closer attention to the local needs of young people and, at the same time, addresses the systemic challenges faced by youth work, particularly with regard to its profile and professionalisation.

Precarity of employment is also a major challenge for youth work in Slovenia and one that is linked to the uncertainty that attends the funding of youth work. Precarity means that staff turnover is high, which has an adverse effect on the quality of youth work.

The challenge for youth work, in addition to establishing quality standards and providing quality youth work, lies in ensuring that it enjoys a sufficiently high profile outside the sector as well. In the opinion of sector representatives, it remains low, with little connection to and cooperation with the formal education system. Young people at school should be made more aware of the possibility of taking part in activities outside school; this would encourage them to continue to enjoy high-quality leisure time in these spaces even after they have finished their schooling. Youth work is facing the considerable challenge of how to reach different stakeholders and raise its profile by publicising its impact on and importance for young people, the local community

and wider society. Greater recognition for youth work would, in the opinion of representatives of youth centres and other youth work NGOs, lead to greater support for youth work at national and local level (Deželan and Vombergar, 2023).

Most activities, including a substantial part of youth work, moved online in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This gave further impetus to debates on the importance of digital youth work as a response to the spirit of the times, although these debates had already been under way before the arrival of the pandemic; it also set something of a trap for youth work by suggesting that digital youth work could be seen as a substitute for youth work that takes place through live interaction between participants. This is something Jurij Šarman is keenly aware of: 'I think that digital youth work can be very useful, but not the prevailing approach within youth work' (interview, 14 April 2021). This means that the situational development of one area of youth work has made it necessary to undertake a thorough reconsideration of the direction of development of youth work as a whole; and the fact is that while there is no going back, a naked acceptance of technological determinism will inevitably lead to ruin. Barbara Zupan believes that these changes will, sooner rather than later, result in the emergence of new organisations in this sector better able to make use of the new methods and address the new challenges of young people. It will be vital for youth work actors to adopt the mindset that 'youth work must not be static, but develop and grow together with the people and content that surround us' (interview, 21 April 2021).

The situation in which young people find themselves today, in this period of near-constant crisis, must be understood through the social context in which they live. They no longer view the future with certainty, as a promise or as something to which they are entitled, but as a threat (Galimberti, 2009, 21–22). It is therefore particularly important that young people have, at this time of great uncertainty and discomfort, which has social and cultural origins, a pillar of support through which they can find meaning and pursue their life objectives; and at times like these, youth workers and youth work can be among the most vital factors in young people's lives. However, without the adequate and necessary support of the state or public authorities, youth workers will not be able to provide the necessary support and encouragement. Supporting youth work organisations also means involving them to a greater extent in the policy formation process, as Tea Jarc points out (interview, 20 April 2021):

> *This does not mean that young people merely find out about things through documents that have already been published, but that they are involved in the process of formulating these documents and of monitoring and implementing measures, i.e. their delivery and evaluation. Young people should therefore not have the role merely of observer or adviser, but be given greater opportunities to be part of the decision-making process.*

Policymakers, and not just those involved in the youth field, should be very concerned about the findings of the *Mladina 2020* study (Lavrič and Deželan, 2021), which showed that more than four-fifths of young people were prepared to move permanently to another European country if this would provide them with greater opportunities in life. Moreover, they were not prepared only to move to a 'safe distance' or another EU Member State: more than half would consider relocating permanently to another continent in search of better living conditions. This merely shows that we need youth work more than we think we do — not because this would create opportunities for

young people so that they do not leave for other countries or other continents to make a living, but mainly because of the extreme levels of despair that young people so obviously feel, to the point where they are prepared to make drastic adjustments to their plans simply in order to lead a decent life. This also creates a series of needs and mental states that youth work is perhaps more able to address than any other field, and probably why, given the numbers of young people who feel this way, youth work is more vital today than it has ever been.

Looking towards the future

- Serious effort must continue to be invested in professionalising youth work in line with the general standards of occupational professionalisation rather than with the partial interests of some individuals and organisations. This should include all publicly accredited steps for obtaining and recognising education levels, sectoral qualifications and quality assurance systems. This could further the professional development of youth workers, improve the quality of youth work and lead to a recognition of the positive outcomes that youth work produces. In relation to this, consideration must be given to setting up formal education in the youth and youth work fields in the form of: (a) publicly accredited education programmes; (b) the systematic regulation of non-formal education for youth workers that complements formal education; (c) the upgrading of the existing national vocational qualification for youth workers and greater focus on promoting it.
- To ensure the comprehensive development of youth work, quality standards and guidelines, including the principles of high-quality youth work, must be formulated and adopted.
- To measure the achievement of the objectives of high-quality youth work, mechanisms must be put in place for monitoring the delivery of youth work in the qualitative (and not just the quantitative) sense, and for measuring the impacts of youth work. Research into the impacts on the community also needs to be strengthened, which means that relevant community stakeholders will have to be involved in obtaining this information. It is also important for youth workers to be relieved of the task of measuring the impact of their work, with experts and research groups being funded to perform those tasks instead.
- Youth work must be provided with adequate and stable funding for steady development of the field and the strategic development and professionalisation of youth work organisations. This should be established in such a way as to enable organisations that work with young people to follow their strategic directions rather than having to abandon them if they wish to meet the criteria of public calls and the demands of a particular priority.
- If the desired effects of youth work are to be secured and youth work carried out to a high standard, a support environment must be put in place that provides suitable forms of employment for youth workers, thereby enabling them to move away from the precarity that currently dominates the sector as a result of the short-term nature of projects.
- To secure the right conditions for youth work, steps must be taken to ensure that physical and virtual spaces for the provision of youth work are accessible to young people, and funding provided for the purchase of equipment to enable organisations to manage and carry out youth work properly.

- The profile of youth work must be raised if adequate funding is to be secured. This will also improve the image of youth work and help to overcome the prejudices that attend it.
- Youth work must be designed for young people above all. They must be involved at all stages of project development, including project design and the selection of the topics they wish to address.
- Better information needs to be provided to young people on the options and opportunities provided by youth work. This also means the establishment of more direct access to the wider youth population, which must be addressed via the channels they prefer to use.
- Youth work organisations must be provided with the opportunity to strengthen their capacities and upskill their staff through publicly accredited and high-quality education and training programmes so that they are better able to meet the growing needs of young people.

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