

## EUROPEAN ACADEMY ON YOUTH WORK - KEYNOTE PRESENTATION

### (Social) Innovation in the Context of Youth Work: Youth-led Community Development

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I will admit it. I am obsessed with my hometown. It is neither the greatest, largest, most beautiful, most rich, nor most successful town of Slovenia. But it has the greatest history. The 500 year old history of mercury mining, of being worlds second largest mercury mine and home to engineers, doctors, scientists and miners from whole Central Europe. Ofcourse, not everything is rosy and It has many structural challenges, such as population decline and outmigration of youth, but for me it still is the most interesting town in the world.

And I am not alone. Since 2012, a group of students of architecture, marketing, sociology, tourism and history, have been working on a project, called Idrija 2020. Idrija 2020 is a youth association that was, from the beginning on, though as a experimental youth organisation. It was born out of feeling that young people need another type of youth NGO, a type that goes beyond the traditional limits of youth organisations. And moreover, that local community needs someone who will rethink its way of working and tackle the big challenges of population decline, lack of jobs for non-technicians and slow depression. We saw that only young people can be a catalyst for change and only young generation can lead toward a future of a town we wanted to see.



So you ask, what is beyond the traditional limits of youth organisations and how can young people change the town. In the past 7 years, we have organised trips to publicly inaccessible parts of the mine 120 metres below the surface, co-shaped and co-developed a new awarded youth center, created luxury jewelry brand inspired by the traditional craft of lacemaking, published a visionary magazine, co-organised a modern culinary festival around traditional dish, and created a strategy for youth policy, city development and – last year – for tourism development. We were young people working with young people – but with intention of facilitating the development of the local community. Either by inspiring and showcasing that some things can be done differently or by simply provoking decision-makers and rigid structures. While we cared about the personal and inter-personal development of our young members and colleagues, our main goal was always the development of the local community.

This is why we blended youth activities with urbanism and urban development, with heritage protection, branding and strategic development. This is why we worked at the fringes of youth sector, always with one leg in policy-making, agenda-setting and business development. When I try to think, why we received several awards, the most prominent of them was winning at European Social Innovation Competition, I can guess it was for three reasons:

- Firstly, all too often, in the eyes of policy-makers and businesses, the youth sector is seen as a playground, a sort of voluntary school without grades and responsibilities. With our work, we have demonstrated that we are more serious, more professional and have higher standards of excellence than many »professional« organisations.
- Secondly, in a world, where young people are seen as you-only-live-once hedonists and without long-term views and plans, we have talked about 10, 20 or 50-years strategies for our organisations and communities. We were talking about the future, about planning for a future we want.
- And thirdly, we never gave up. We were – and still are – the strange youth group that doesn't fit in any of the boxes. We do youth work, but we are not youth workers. We work with art, but we are not artist. We sell our services, but we are not a business.

So, where does this story lead to?

We believe that our formula can work in other contexts as well. Ofcourse, any solution need to be adapted to the local contexts, but the general principles can be transferred. This is basically the idea behind HeritageLab concept that was the winner of last years Social Innovation Competition. With HeritageLab we imagined an incubation programme that helps young people develop new products and services based on rich cultural heritage. Although this description sound very niche, think about it. Cultural heritage is one of the most equally distributed assets across Europe. In most communities – especially smaller and slightly peripheral areas – it is one of the main potentials – an unpolished diamond. It is a potential not only for local development, but for young people to play a prominent role. For young people to change their communities. To co-create and co-shape their futures and futures of their towns. And maybe most importantly, to change the image of youth in the eyes of their communities.

HeritageLab builds on our past experiences, on the idea of blending youth work, idea incubation and acupuncture community development, and it will be tested in Idrija, this year. Yet we believe that we should not stop here. We want to connect with like-minded organisations and initiatives, and co-create a network of HeritageLabs – a network of youth-powered innovation catalysts.

For us, youth work can be seen as polishing of diamonds. Young people already are skilled and creative, and with the right support of mentors, technologies – here we partner with supercomputing company Arctur – and network of like-minded individuals and media and policy attention, they can become the new generators of change for their communities.

So if you think, this is a chance for your young people, go ahead and let's do something together.

Thank you.



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