EAYW

European Academy on Youth Work

#EAYW MEETS THE 3RD EUROPEAN YOUTH WORK CONVENTION:
Striving to further develop quality and innovation in youth work

» *How does innovation connect to societal changes? What is the role of innovation in youth work? And why is it important to foster it? Those were some questions reflected upon at the 3rd European Youth Work Convention. #EAYW was there to listen and share our current state of the play and future plans.*

The 3rd European Youth Work Convention was held online from 7th to 10th December 2020, with the aim to establish the European Youth Work Agenda as a strategic framework for further developing and strengthening youth work practice and policies in Europe. Around 1000 representatives from the youth work community of practice discussed, shared and further developed ideas for the final Declaration of the Convention and the European Youth Work Agenda.

The 3rd European Youth Work Convention took place during the German EU Council Presidency and the German Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and was organised by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and JUGEND für Europa, the National Agency for the EU programmes Erasmus+: Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps.

Promoting youth work

7-10 December 2020

The digital Convention

3rd European **Youth Work** Convention
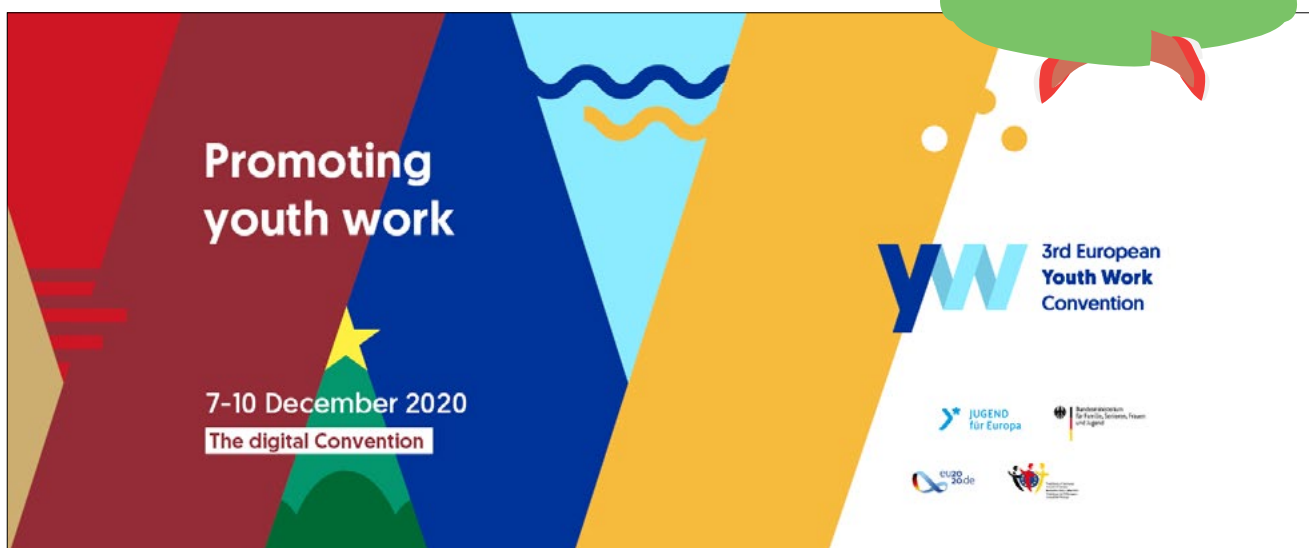
JUGEND für Europa

Photo from Facebook of 3rd European Youth Work Convention

Innovation and the youth work sector

During the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (hereafter: the Convention), the community of practice discussed and shared ideas on how to establish the European Youth Work Agenda (hereafter: the Agenda). Discussions and reflections were revolving around eight strands of importance for the Agenda, which can be found **here**.

Supporting the ability of youth work to tackle emerging challenges and innovate its practices represents one of the thematic strands of the Agenda. Several workshops were held on this topic. Participants were asked to think about fields of action related to innovation in youth work. Some of the participants' concluding thoughts were connected to the **creation of spaces for cooperation and exchange at interregional and global level** and ensuring that **young people are engaged in democratic society** and that their voice is being heard, especially on topics they are already passionate and vocal about, such as environmental issues or reproductive health. Also, it was highlighted that we need **innovation and responses to challenges based on evidence** (such as research), which means that we need better connection between policy, practice and research.

It was concluded that we should foster a culture and practice of innovation in youth work by **improving smart youth work, digital competences of youth workers and youth**, but also **making youth work more green.**

Societal change and innovation

As societies are constantly changing, so is youth work, too. This was clearly shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the youth work sector had to adapt its practices quickly to new realities. The phenomena of digitalisation, innovation and social change were issues addressed by the panel discussion "Societal change and innovation".

Theo Spanos Dunfey, president of Global Citizens Circle, talked about the power of communication and how it connects with societal change and, respectively, innovation: *"Change begins when we interact with one another. We have to engage into communication that gives, takes or challenges the assumptions we have about the world. Honest exchanges will create long lasting change. If we want to have a say in social change, we have to build trust between people who have different backgrounds, and it starts with communication".* Dunfey believes that power in social change comes from honest communication, which is also the basis for innovation.

When talking about innovation, Veronica Stefan, founder of the think tank Digital Citizens Romania, mentioned all the efforts made in the youth work sector to innovate its practices. She concluded that youth work was *"adaptive to changes and, in particular, to individual needs"*, which made it *"innovative in itself"*.

Lars Norqvist from Umea University in Sweden underlined the importance of learning and how it impacts young people. As digitalisation is an important part of youth work, we should think about how we are using digital tools. He highlighted the thoughts of Marshall McLuhan, who said: *"We become what we behold. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us"*, in connection to using digital technology in youth work activities.

#EAYW meets the Convention – further support for developing quality and innovation in youth work is needed

EAYW also had the opportunity to speak at the Convention and to present the next steps in our journey. The workshop session was opened with a presentation by Dr. Naomi Thompson from Goldsmiths, University of London. She highlighted three innovative responses in "radical youth work": working together, which includes cross-sectorial cooperation; resisting in defining young people as threat; and shifting our actions from prevention to pro-

Photo: Naomi Thompson (left; photo taken from here) / Sonja Mitter Škulj (right; private archive)

tection. Dr. Thompson argued that young people were seen as troubled ("deviled folks") and that we needed to shift our view to seeing young people as vulnerable, not threatening, where youth work has a significant role.

Political and ideological environments around us were constantly changing, but youth work principles remained the same, Thompson argued, concluding that *"youth work has always been experimental and innovative, pushing boundaries that other forms of practice with young people do not."* The presentation finished with open questions for further reflection (taken from de St. Croix, T. 2010, in Belton B. Radical Youth Work, Lyme Regis: Russell House):

Is the purpose of youth work informal education or social control? Does youth work tackle or worsen oppression and structural inequality? How should youth work respond to 'new managerialism' (the drive for targeted and outcome based work)?

Sonja Mitter Škulj, coordinator of the European Academy on Youth Work (EAYW), briefly presented the EAYW on behalf of the partnership of currently 12 National Agencies for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps and SALTO Resource Centres, explaining its purpose of creating a regular platform for all stakeholders of the European youth work community of practice, including practice, policy and research, for knowledge gathering, exchange, peer-learning and reflection on how to more effectively support innovation and quality in youth work across Europe.

According to current research, including research undertaken in the framework of the EAYW, there was a need to further explore issues such as: *How to define innovation in youth work? Why and when do we need innovation (in view of the need to maintain, further develop and innovate approaches and practices)? Under which conditions does innovation happen, which factors contribute*

to enabling or supporting innovative developments in youth work? How to sustain innovation in youth work?

In the discussion, the overall relevance of the topic of innovation and current trends for the further development of youth work was highlighted as well as the influence of political and societal frameworks on defining and supporting innovative approaches. Participants confirmed the need for stronger dialogue between different stakeholders, especially from practice and policy, and the need for platforms, such as the EAYW, which can provide a space where such dialogue and further reflection can happen.

Final thoughts... innovation is important at all levels!
After four days filled with discussions, the 3rd European Youth Work Convention ended with a **final Declaration called "Signposts for the Future"** with recommendations for the further development of youth work in Europe.

The Convention was an important space for reflection and discussion. It offered the opportunity to the European youth work community of practice to influence political processes and to think about how to implement the Declaration in the different national realities in the future.

The topic of innovation was highlighted, especially in relation to the "new normal" we are living in. As mentioned in the final Declaration, there is a need to foster innovation on different levels of youth work: on a personal level (in our minds), on the organisational level and on the level of practices (methods, tools) we are using in youth work: *"...we should always be striving towards the maintenance of the good structures and practices that already exist, their development when the need arises, and the space for innovation in our thinking, our organisation and our practices."* (Declaration "Signposts for the Future", p.5.)