

Companion for Navigating Innovation and Futures Thinking in Youth Work

Insights and Guiding Questions
Developed by the Field for the Field



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Editorial info

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Chapters and Topics



1 THE NATURE OF INNOVATION

TOPICS:

- Creativity produces ideas, innovation puts them into action
- Innovation is about building on, including and outgrowing the old
- Context matters
- Innovation is a process, not a goal in itself
- Innovation is a learning process, not a problem-solving process
- Intentional vs. unintentional innovation
- Innovation and the emergence of the new
- Innovative mindset
- Self-perception of youth work as innovative: true or false?



2 PARTICIPATION AND CO-CREATION

TOPICS:

- Co-development and cross-pollination
- Learning from young people about youth work
- Young people as co-creators, not 'just' beneficiaries
- Research and innovation
- Standardisation vs. flexibility
- Technology and innovation
- New areas of exploration
- Tools do not produce innovation, people do
- From I to WE



3 FUTURE ORIENTATION AND LITERACY

TOPICS:

- Multiple futures (multiverse) and future literacy
- Future readiness: Be like water

- Crisis of perception
- Sense-making. It is better to be vaguely right than exactly wrong.
- Working with young people, working with the future
- Rethinking the societal role
- Multiple drivers
- Young people as futurists
- Innovation, sustainability and transformation

4 VALUES AND AGENCY

TOPICS:

- Value-based or adding value?
- Values and ethics
- Values as a stable core
- Hope and agency
- Acknowledging emotions
- Uncertainty as a permanent condition
- Inclusive innovation
- Inner and outer sides of change
- Reacting vs. shaping

5 ENABLERS AND CONDITIONS

TOPICS:

- Innovation and crisis
- Organisational support for innovation
- Triggers and conditions for innovation
- The right timing for innovation
- Trust, safety and courage
- Systemic approaches and the right to fail
- Innovation and funding dependency
- Spaces for innovation

TOPIC

Creativity produces ideas, innovation puts them into action

MESSAGE

Innovation is not just about having new ideas, but about turning ideas into practices.

DESCRIPTION

It is about innovative services or approaches that actually work and last. It most often means developing, adapting, or reworking existing ideas, structures, and practices to respond better to changing needs.





QUESTION

What helps turn your ideas into practices that actually work and last, and what stands in the way?



TOPIC

Innovation is about building on, including and outgrowing the old

MESSAGE

Innovation means evolution, not deletion or removal.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation disturbs the present, but it does it respectfully. It is not about discarding and deleting but rather building on and outgrowing. What once served us well needs to be acknowledged. Allowing the former ways to leave gracefully creates the space for the new ways to emerge.





QUESTION

How can we let go of familiar ways of working respectfully (recognising what they gave us) and what makes this difficult when they no longer serve their purpose well?



TOPIC

Context matters

MESSAGE

What matters is not what works everywhere, but what works ‘here’ and ‘now’.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work is context-specific and grows through local ownership and reinterpretation, not universal definitions or mechanical replication across contexts. What can be defined as innovative varies across countries, cultures, and realities. Attempts to define innovation universally or transfer it almost mechanically betray or at least misunderstand its nature.





QUESTION

How do you stay open to learning from other contexts and how do you ensure that what you adopt truly fits what needs to grow in your own context?



TOPIC

Innovation is a process, not a goal in itself

MESSAGE

Innovation is not the goal! Orientation is.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work is not an end in itself. What the field needs most in times of complexity and uncertainty is not more initiatives, tools, or solutions, but shared orientation: ways to make sense of change, clarify direction, and decide what to strengthen, protect, or transform. Innovation becomes meaningful only when it serves this broader need for orientation.





QUESTION

**In our practice and especially
in times of uncertainty,
are our innovation efforts driven
more by the urge to act,
or by a shared understanding
of where we want to go?**



TOPIC

Innovation is a learning process, not a problem-solving process

MESSAGE

Innovation in youth work is a learning process,
not only a problem-solving process.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation involves exploration, experimentation, reflection, and adjustment over time. Its value lies not only in outcomes, but also in what individuals, organisations, and systems learn through the process. Treating innovation as learning strengthens future readiness and professional growth.





QUESTION

What have we learned through our innovation processes so far, looking beyond the results they produced?



TOPIC

Intentional vs. unintentional innovation

MESSAGE

Innovation happens both by design and by necessity, and both are valid.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work often emerges unplanned: under pressure, in response to crisis, or when institutions fail. It is reactive, unpredictable, and situation driven. But innovation can also be an intentional, everyday professional practice - sensing change, questioning routines, experimenting, learning, and adapting. Both paths lead to innovation, but they differ in agency, sustainability, and replicability.





QUESTION

Looking at your own context, when has innovation happened by necessity, and when by intention, and what would it take to be more proactive and structured in your approach to innovation?



TOPIC

Innovation and the emergence of the new

MESSAGE

The emergence of the new cannot be forced but can be enabled.

DESCRIPTION

Rapid, and often unexpected changes in the external environment might require new ways of working to emerge, even though youth workers might not be aware of what those “new ways” could be at that moment. Creating space for the emergence of the new requires openness, embracing discomfort, experimentation and readiness to leave the old ways behind.





QUESTION

How do you create conditions that support the emergence of new ways of doing youth work in your organisation? What might be limiting in this process?



TOPIC

Innovative mindset

MESSAGE

An innovative mindset is necessary for any innovation to happen.

DESCRIPTION

The most important condition for innovation is not having tools, competences, or structures, but attitude: openness, courage, curiosity, emotional intelligence, creativity, collaboration, and willingness to act when facing uncertainty. But attitude only becomes real in practice, in how you speak, listen, decide, and relate to young people day to day. An innovative mindset is not something you have, it is something you do.





QUESTION

How can we develop an innovative mindset, even in contexts that do not seem supportive of innovation?



TOPIC

Self-perception of youth work as innovative: true or false?

MESSAGE

Youth work and innovation are intrinsically interconnected.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation is already embedded in everyday youth work practice. Youth workers adapt continuously, very often informally and invisibly, to be able to attract, involve, and reach young people and marginalised groups, and react to sudden change. This adaptation is not abstract - it happens in how youth workers listen, respond, make judgements under pressure, and relate to young people in concrete situations.





QUESTION

How innovative are we really in our organisation, including in our everyday informal practices, and how can we make this more visible and strengthen it?



TOPIC

Co-development and cross-pollination

MESSAGE

Innovation is strengthened through collaboration and shared exploration.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation rarely happens in isolation; it usually involves teams, shared leadership, diverse perspectives, and collective reflection that help individuals and communities feel less alone when facing uncertainty. Without these interconnections and support networks, the innovative practices struggle to survive and expand.





QUESTION

**How is collective intelligence
strengthening innovation
and change compared to
working alone?**



TOPIC

Learning from young people about youth work

MESSAGE

Without youth participation, innovation in youth work loses its legitimacy.

DESCRIPTION

Young people are co-creators, initiators, and active agents in shaping the future of youth work. As experts of their own lives and lived realities, they can trigger, shape, and drive innovation in youth work.





QUESTION

**What are we learning
from young people about
how youth work needs to
develop in the future?**



TOPIC

Young people as co-creators, not 'just' beneficiaries

MESSAGE

Young people are the co-creators, not just the beneficiaries. / Innovation without young people is not youth work innovation.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work is grounded in the lived realities, experiences, and perspectives of young people. When young people are positioned only as recipients of services or outcomes, innovation risks reproducing existing power imbalances and missing what truly matters in their lives. Treating young people as co-creators means involving them meaningfully in shaping ideas, decisions, processes, and directions. This is not only a methodological choice, but a core principle that defines the legitimacy, relevance, and ethical foundation of innovation in youth work.





QUESTION

Where do young people genuinely shape ideas, decisions, and directions in your innovation processes, and what, in your organisation, limits their influence?



TOPIC

Research and innovation

MESSAGE

Evidence may encourage innovation, but it does not generate it.

DESCRIPTION

Youth research plays a crucial role in identifying needs, supporting advocacy, and informing youth and youth work policy development. Nonetheless, innovation emerges from a regular interaction between research, practice, and lived experience, not from research alone.





QUESTION

**How do you translate
research insights into concrete
action and improvement in
youth work practice?**



TOPIC

Standardisation vs. flexibility

MESSAGE

Professionalisation without adequate and wider reflection can, in fact, undermine innovation.

DESCRIPTION

Professionalisation and standardisation are becoming more prominent in European youth work. These developments strengthen quality, visibility, and legitimacy, while also inviting reflection on how youth work can sustain flexibility, creativity, and bottom-up innovation.





QUESTION

In what situations do standards and professional requirements help your work with young people, and in what situations do they make it harder to respond to new or changing needs?



TOPIC

Technology and innovation

MESSAGE

Technology is a useful tool, but not a substitute for human connection and interaction.

DESCRIPTION

Digital tools might enable continuity, creativity, and reach, especially in times of crisis. At the same time, digitalisation as a process also raises questions about inclusion, the quality of relationships, and the core values of youth work.





QUESTION

How do your values and principles guide the way you use technology in youth work, and how does this affect both its advantages and its risks?



TOPIC

New areas of exploration

MESSAGE

Innovation begins where there are new areas of exploration.

DESCRIPTION

Reaching better and more young people requires youth workers to move further from their usual established spaces, develop out-of-the-box approaches, and meet young people where they are. It might also mean cooperating with ‘unconventional’ (unusual) partners.





QUESTION

Which young people are we currently not reaching and what new spaces, approaches, or partnerships might help us reach them?



TOPIC

Tools do not produce innovation, people do

MESSAGE

Tools support innovation processes, but they do not create innovation.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation tools can help structure reflection, exploration, and collaboration, but they cannot replace professional judgement, relationships, and favourable conditions. Without purpose, trust, and shared orientation, tools remain empty instruments rather than drivers of meaningful innovation.





QUESTION

How do you differentiate between using new tools and really changing your practice in a meaningful way, and which competences matter most for innovation in your context?



TOPIC

From I to WE

MESSAGE

Shifting from 'I' to 'we' is important when thinking about the future.

DESCRIPTION

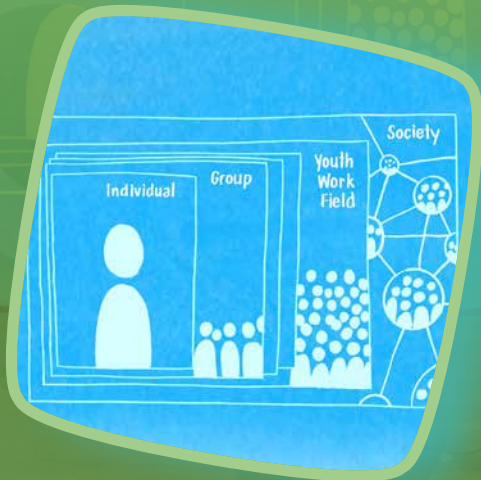
Futures thinking in youth work requires moving from individual questions and concerns to collective responsibility. The future is co-created, not faced alone, and because of that, it requires shared ownership, collaborative dialogue, and the recognition of interdependence across the youth work field.





QUESTION

What would change in terms of the impact of youth work if future challenges were approached as shared responsibilities across the field rather than as separate organisational or individual issues?



TOPIC

Multiple futures (multiverse) and future literacy

MESSAGE

Future readiness starts with the capacity to imagine and engage with multiple possible futures.

DESCRIPTION

Youth work benefits from exploring multiple scenarios rather than trying to predict what will happen.

Future literacy is the capacity to do this: knowing where to look, reading emerging signals, and shaping directions rather than waiting for the future to arrive.

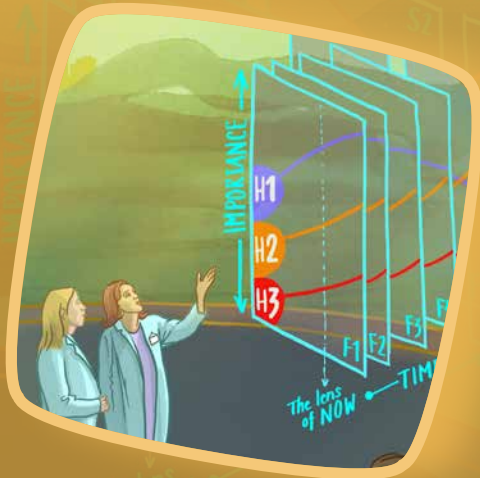
These futures unfold differently across contexts, depending on local conditions, values, and the choices made today by youth workers, young people, and communities.





QUESTION

How do you understand future literacy in your context, and how ready are you to explore multiple possible futures rather than focusing only on what seems most likely?



TOPIC

Future readiness: Be like water

MESSAGE

Future readiness is a mindset and ongoing practice, not a fixed state.

DESCRIPTION

Future readiness means working with uncertainty, ambiguity, interconnectedness, and non-linearity instead of trying to control certainty. It requires moving from anxiety and risk-driven approaches towards a constructive orientation grounded in the firm belief that change is possible. This capacity is developed through ongoing reflection, dialogue, learning, and adaptation.





QUESTION

How can you strengthen this future readiness capacity in your team or organisation?



TOPIC

Crisis of perception

MESSAGE

The deepest crisis is a crisis of perception, an inability to see complexity, interconnectedness, and long-term consequences.

DESCRIPTION

The current challenges of youth work are not isolated problems but manifestations of complex, interconnected systems. One of the fundamental challenges youth work faces is developing the capacity to perceive these patterns, face the discomfort of complexity, and let go of old certainties, when necessary, even when this feels chaotic. Change is happening faster than systems, policies, and structures can respond, requiring systems thinking rather than isolated problem-solving.





QUESTION

How does seeing challenges as interconnected patterns rather than isolated problems change the way you understand what is happening and how you decide to respond?



TOPIC

Sense-making. It is better to be vaguely right than exactly wrong.

MESSAGE

Sense-making is a central task for youth work in times of uncertainty.

DESCRIPTION

In times of rapid change and complexity, youth work must help young people (and youth workers themselves) to interpret, understand, and find meaning in confusing or contradictory information, experiences, and social developments.





QUESTION

**What signals can you already see
or sense that might grow and
shape how youth work will look
in the future?**



TOPIC

Working with young people, working with the future

MESSAGE

Youth work is always shaping the future, through actions, narratives, decisions, and oversights, whether intentional or not.

DESCRIPTION

Youth work is not about preparing for some distant future; it is already happening amid emerging changes that shape the future realities. The real question is therefore not whether youth work influences the future, but how aware we are of that influence. How youth workers see their own role - reacting to change or actively shaping it - affects their everyday practice and the related consequences.





QUESTION

Do you see yourselves as co-creators actively shaping future directions, or as passive recipients, reacting to external change? Why?



TOPIC

Rethinking the societal role

MESSAGE

The societal role of youth work cannot be fixed once and for all; it requires continuous (re)negotiation in changing contexts.

DESCRIPTION

Youth work is strongly shaped by wider social, political, and global developments. The youth work field has never fully controlled its own future, and its societal role must be continuously renegotiated in dialogue with changing contexts and emerging needs.





QUESTION

What signals in your context suggest that the societal role of youth work needs to be rethought, and who do you need to engage with this process?



TOPIC

Multiple drivers

MESSAGE

Many drivers of change are already visible, even if their consequences are not yet fully understood.

DESCRIPTION

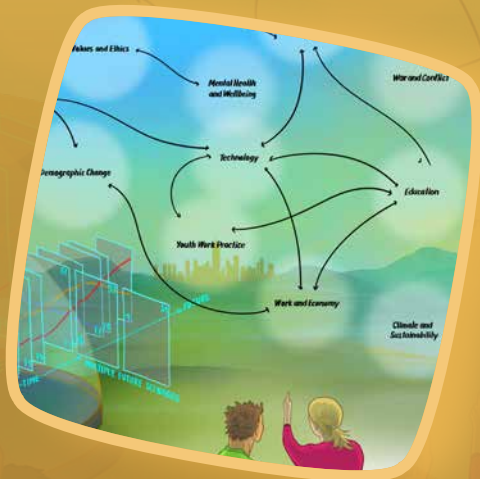
The future of youth work is shaped by multiple interconnected developments: technological, social, political, economic, and environmental. These cannot be understood or addressed in isolation; they require systems thinking and recognition of complex interdependencies.





QUESTION

What are the strongest societal trends and shifts that might impact the lives of young people and the role of youth work in your context?



TOPIC

Young people as futurists

MESSAGE

Young people's voices bring important perspectives to future discussions.

DESCRIPTION

Students, young people, and newer generations of youth workers bring fresh perspectives, challenge established assumptions and often have more direct experience of contemporary youth realities, digital cultures, and emerging social issues that shape the future of youth work.





QUESTION

What stories about the future do young people share, and how do these perspectives challenge the ways we currently understand youth work and its future?



TOPIC

Innovation, sustainability and transformation

MESSAGE

Innovation keeps youth work relevant, but there are moments when deeper transformation is needed.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation is necessary for youth work to remain relevant, attractive, and legitimate — for young people and for future youth workers. But innovation alone is not always enough. There are moments when existing ways of working no longer serve emerging realities, and when what is needed is not a better version of the same thing, but something fundamentally different. Youth work must remain alert to those signals.





QUESTION

**Looking 10 – 20 years ahead,
how does your current approach
to innovation support the
long-term sustainability of youth
work — and how do you
recognise the moment when
innovation is no longer enough?**



TOPIC

Value-based or adding value?

MESSAGE

Innovation without value can become a mere distraction.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work is not about novelty but about value and meaningful change. Innovation is defined by the realities it tries to respond to, shaped by young people's lived experiences, needs, dreams, and social contexts. It must strengthen inclusion, empowerment, participation, and social justice. Something is not innovative because it is new, but because it creates meaningful change in a specific context. If innovation undermines these core values, it is not innovation at all but distraction.





QUESTION

**How do you recognise whether
'innovation' in your context
creates meaningful change
rooted in youth work values,
and is not just about introducing
something new?**



TOPIC

Values and ethics

MESSAGE

Values and ethics are core future-related issues, particularly in relation to technology, data, social cohesion, and democratic life.

DESCRIPTION

As technology advances and societies become more polarised, youth work faces ethical questions about data privacy, how algorithms work, digital inclusion, and how to support democratic participation and social cohesion in increasingly fragmented public spheres.





QUESTION

How do your everyday decisions support the protection of values such as inclusion, trust and democratic participation, in times of rapid technological and social change?



TOPIC

Values as a stable core

MESSAGE

Values are non-negotiable anchors for youth work in times of change.

DESCRIPTION

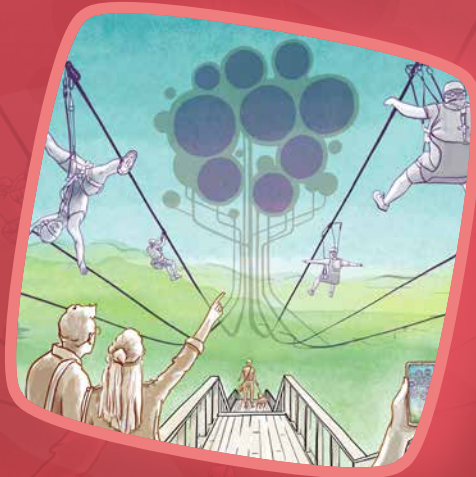
As youth work adapts to new realities, values such as inclusion, participation, empowerment, and social justice provide stability and direction. These values are not flexible variables to be adjusted to trends or funding priorities; they are anchors that guide decisions, partnerships, and responses to change.





QUESTION

When the pressure for adaptation is growing, how do you recognise the line between necessary change and drifting away from your core youth work values?



TOPIC

Hope and agency

MESSAGE

Hope and agency enable a meaningful engagement when facing uncertainty.

DESCRIPTION

Hope is not the same as optimism (believing everything will work out), but the commitment to act meaningfully when the outcomes are uncertain. Agency involves a conscious awareness of the capacity to influence reality, together with the responsibility that comes with it.





QUESTION

How do you strengthen your sense of hope and agency when facing uncertainty, rather than withdrawing or waiting for certainty?



TOPIC

Acknowledging emotions

MESSAGE

All emotions linked to the future, such as fear, hope, or uncertainty, need to be acknowledged and addressed in safe and supportive spaces.

DESCRIPTION

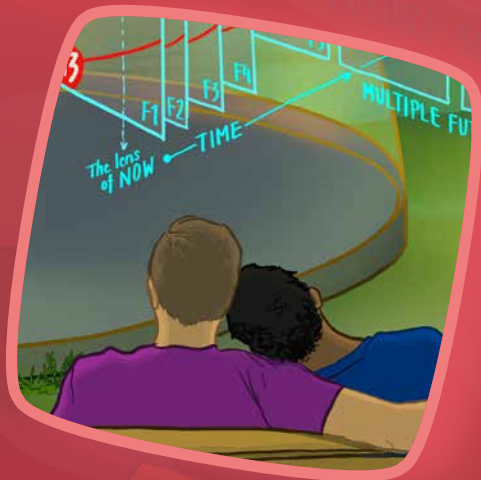
Talking about the future might bring up mixed emotions, such as fear, stress, hope, curiosity, or excitement. Instead of avoiding dealing with these feelings, youth work must create spaces where they can be acknowledged, explored, and worked through collectively as part of the practice.





QUESTION

How do you create spaces where emotions about the future can be acknowledged and worked through, and what happens when they are ignored in favour of plans and actions?



TOPIC

Uncertainty as a permanent condition

MESSAGE

Uncertainty is a permanent condition of youth work, not a temporary disruption.

DESCRIPTION

Youth work does not operate in stable or predictable environments. Social, political, economic, and cultural change is ongoing and interconnected. Rather than waiting for stability to return, youth work must develop the capacity to act, reflect, and make judgments within uncertainty as a normal condition of the field.





QUESTION

What strategies and competences help you to act and make judgements within ongoing uncertainty?



TOPIC

Inclusive innovation

MESSAGE

An innovation that excludes reproduces inequality.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation in youth work loses its purpose when the voices of marginalised young people are not heard. Participants identified inclusion, diversity, and visibility of youth work as core needs for the future. This calls for effective systemic solutions, which imply including all voices in the process.





QUESTION

**Whose voices are missing
'at the table' and what does this
say about who may still be
excluded or invisible?**



TOPIC

Inner and outer sides of change

MESSAGE

Responding to future challenges requires a whole system change approach, and to address inner and outer dimensions simultaneously.

DESCRIPTION

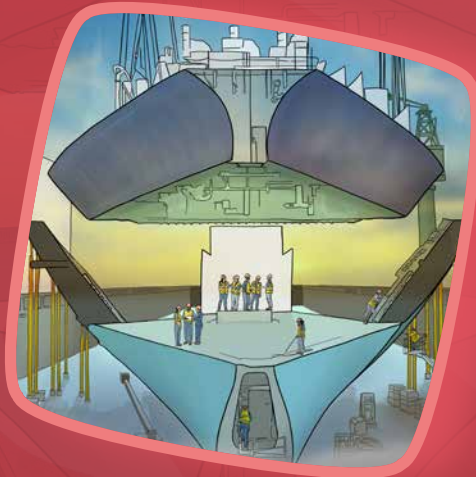
Inner work (mindset, values, emotions, perception, narratives, patterns) and outer work (structures, policies, funding, practices, skills, frameworks, strategies) are inseparable. Meaningful change requires paying attention to those two dimensions at once, recognising that shifts in consciousness and shifts in systems reinforce each other.





QUESTION

What happens when efforts to change structures and systems are not supported or backed up with changes in mindsets, values, and ways of thinking, and where do you notice this in your context?



TOPIC

Reacting vs. shaping

MESSAGE

Youth work must move from reacting to change towards shaping and creating futures.

DESCRIPTION

If youth work only responds to emerging challenges, it risks remaining in a permanent state of reaction. Future-ready youth work requires intentional positioning: recognising agency, making choices, and actively shaping directions together with young people, rather than adapting only after change has already happened.





QUESTION

What supports a shift from reacting to change towards actively shaping future directions together with young people, and what tends to hold you back?



TOPIC

Innovation and crisis

MESSAGE

Crisis can trigger innovation, but innovation is not an automatic outcome of crisis.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation is often triggered by crisis, frustration, exclusion, or the failure of approaches. When existing ways of working are no longer effective, innovation is not just practical but becomes an ethical obligation. Therefore, youth work has to adapt to remain true to its values and accompany young people.





QUESTION

What are we learning from crises in our context and how does this learning shape our readiness to change and innovate?



TOPIC

Organisational support for innovation

MESSAGE

Innovation starts with people but requires systems to sustain it.

DESCRIPTION

Although innovation happens within an ecosystem, it is initiated by youth workers and young people who are the closest to lived realities and emerging challenges. However, innovation cannot rely only on motivated individuals; it requires systemic conditions, organisational openness, shared governance, and cross-sectoral cooperation to sustain and spread.





QUESTION

Do you have an innovation framework or a shared approach in your organisation and if not, what would such a framework need to include to support and sustain innovation?



TOPIC

Triggers and conditions for innovation

MESSAGE

Innovation starts with people but requires systems to sustain it.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation happens when disruptive or challenging forces - crisis, frustration, exclusion, or the failure of existing approaches - meet supportive environments. Without both, innovation either never starts or never lasts. Innovative ideas are common in youth work, but they only lead to change when the right conditions exist: time, trust, resources, space for experimentation, and tolerance of uncertainty. When these conditions are missing, innovation is constrained regardless of individual motivation or ideas.





QUESTION

What triggers innovation in your context, and which conditions currently enable it or limit it, even when good ideas are already there?



TOPIC

The right timing for innovation

MESSAGE

Innovation needs time, rhythm, and continuity to generate learning and change.

DESCRIPTION

Meaningful innovation in youth work cannot be rushed or reduced to short-term cycles. Learning, trust-building, and experimentation require time and continuity. When innovation is driven by acceleration and constant urgency, reflection and quality are often lost.





QUESTION

How do we recognise when is the right moment to invest time and continuity in innovation, and not to rush from one urgent task to the next?



TOPIC

Trust, safety and courage

MESSAGE

Trust, psychological safety, courage, and a willingness to question the status quo are essential conditions for innovation.

DESCRIPTION

These conditions create an environment where youth workers and young people feel safe to experiment, take risks, voice different opinions, and challenge 'established' ways of working without the fear of being judged.





QUESTION

In your context, where does it feel safe to speak up and take risks, and where does it not do so (and why)?



TOPIC

Systemic approaches and the right to fail

MESSAGE

Innovation is not possible if failure is not allowed.

DESCRIPTION

By nature, innovation involves trial and error. Therefore, without organisational and policy-level safety nets, youth workers cannot embrace risk and creativity. Innovation is non-linear and, in fact, unpredictable. This is what makes it innovative by nature. Therefore, systems that require certainty, control, and/or guaranteed outcomes systematically prevent or suppress innovation.





QUESTION

How safe does it feel in your context to try out things that might not work, and to learn from them?



TOPIC

Innovation and funding dependency

MESSAGE

External conditions might lead to prioritising survival over innovation.

DESCRIPTION

Innovation is deeply conditioned by financial dependence and funding mechanisms. Short-term or unpredictable funding, rigid project logic, and quantitative indicators mean prioritising ‘predictability’ over relevance. This very often pushes youth workers to repeat ‘what already works’ instead of responding to emerging needs, directing priorities away from young people towards funders’ interests.





QUESTION

How can you balance the need for survival with the need for further development and relevance for young people?



TOPIC

Spaces for innovation

MESSAGE

Innovation and futures thinking require creating intentional spaces for meaningful dialogue and collective exploration across the ecosystem(s).

DESCRIPTION

Innovation does not thrive in overloaded agendas and fragmented discussions. Youth work needs fewer topics, deeper engagement, and more time for reflection and dialogue. These spaces are not only about methods or tools - they are spaces where youth workers and young people can slow down, think together, and question what genuinely matters.





QUESTION

How can you create intentional spaces across the ecosystem for meaningful dialogue and co-creation around issues that matter to young people, and who needs to be part of these conversations?

