Informal Forum with Youth Representatives
Working Breakfast

Youth Work in the Digital Age

8:30 - 10:00, 23 November 2015
Venue: 80 floor, Council of the EU, Justus Lipsius building, Brussels

Chaired by Mr Claude Meisch, Minister for Education, Children and Youth, Luxembourg

Youth Work in the digital age
Background Paper

The new draft EU Work Plan for Youth (2016-2018), to be adopted by the Council of the European Union during its meeting on November 23rd, sets a number of priorities for the European youth policy cooperation in the years to come. One of these priorities is to contribute to addressing the challenges and opportunities of the digital era for youth policy, youth work and young people.

Indeed, figures from Eurostat[1] show in the clearest way that digital media have become a central part of young peoples' lives nowadays and that young people live in a world saturated with digital media, in particular digital social media.

- In 2014, 90% of households including children in the EU have access to internet in their homes.
- In 2014, more than 4 out of 5 young people aged 16-29 in the EU used the Internet on a daily basis.
- In 2014, 4 out of 5 young people aged 16-29 in the EU participated in online social networks.
- In 2014, 4 out of 5 young people aged 16-29 in the EU accessed the internet through mobile or handheld devices.

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[1] All data from Eurostat's survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals.

The internet, with its multiple opportunities for social interaction, such as instant messaging, social networks, blogs, discussion forums, has to be considered a virtual space just next to the offline world. Young people spent an increasing amount of time in this virtual space, doing just what they do offline : growing up, seeking entertainment, social relationships, and a place to express themselves, defining and redefining their identities through engagements with technology and with their peers through technology. Metaphorically speaking, the Internet is young people's street corner of the early 21st century.

Youth work, on the other hand, has a long tradition of supporting young people during their process of growing up. According to the 2013 „Council Conclusions on the contribution of quality youth work to the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people », « *Youth work focuses on the personal and social development of young people and has an extended reach which accesses and engages young people based on their needs and interests and takes account of their environment. Such coverage and reach complements other policy responses for young people and therefore youth work can offer young people points of contact, association and progression.* »[2]

The methods of youth work in supporting young people in the development of their potential are rich and diverse. At their centre lie a number of principles, such as non-formal education, an approach based on the needs of young people, active participation of young people in the provision of youth work, and the open-access character of youth work. Particular forms of youth work, such detached or outreach youth work seek to go out to where young people are, into their own territory.

While these principles and methods have developed into a large body of research, theory and practice over the last decades, the development of the Internet over the last years poses new challenges to youth work. Indeed, at a time when young people spend an increasing amount of their time consuming social media, how can youth work still connect with young people in their own territory, when this territory is a virtual one?

Currently, most youth work organisations are present in the internet. Youth organisations and professional youth work providers have their own websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter and Instagram accounts. Using the street corner metaphor, this type of presence resembles centre-based youth work in the sense that it allows to connect with young people once they enter the places where youth work takes place.

But similarly to detached or outreach youth work, how can youth work providers enter into contact with young people online in the corners where they are, not where youth work is ? In other words, can youth work principles and methods, as they have been built and have proven valid over the last decades, be translated into the online world? How can youth work be a partner in young people's development when an ever growing part of this development is taking place in the virtual space of the internet?

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[2] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52013XG0614(02)&from=EN

This is even more important given that the Internet, next to the many opportunities it offers in terms of stronger social participation, also bears risks. According to Eurostat, there are a number of „*concerns over the use of the internet centre on the safety of children and young people and their behaviour, for example, increasing solitude as young people withdraw to a private place to go online. Furthermore, some children and young people may have their privacy violated when they are online or alternatively they may be exposed to potentially harmful content, which may create dependency, anxiety or aggression.* »

The increased amount of time spent online raises the question of how to balance screen time with real life experiences. The internet can be a place of social interaction but also bears the risk of preventing healthy development. Youth work may also be confronted with finding the correct balance between being present online and offering real life interaction possibilities. Face to face contacts remain an essential part of youth work's possibility to positively support young people.

At the same time, when young people seek for help or support in difficult life situations, their reflex may be to look for help online. In these cases, which form of assistance and support can youth work provide, knowing that a combination of online and real life support and assistance may be the most helpful?

Recent developments have also shown that extremist organisations such the so-called Islamic State very effectively use the social media as a tool for recruitment, particularly of young people.

It has become clear that extremist or criminal organisations very well know how to use digital media, and in particular social media, in order to attract young people. How can youth work help young people in coping with online risks, support them, also online, at a time in their lives when they develop their own identity?

In the light of this background information and in order to start the discussion, participants of the working breakfast are invited to consider the following questions:

1. What would be effective measures and approaches for youth work to react to the challenges raised by the advanced digitalisation of our current societies and life styles?

2. In which ways can youth policy support youth work and young people in dealing with the challenges lying ahead of us in this domain?