

GROWING YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE

Results of the
“Mapping European
youth work ecosystems” study



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Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



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Authors

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1. Introduction

Youth work as an independent, European field of action has undergone an enormous development in the last 15 years. Starting with the 1st European Youth Work Convention (EYWC) in 2010, an attempt was made to identify the different approaches, concepts and strategies of youth work in European countries. The 2nd EYWC (2015) picked up where the first one left off by exploring European common ground. Politically, the Council of Europe defined this common ground in 2017 in its recommendation on youth work (Council of Europe 2017). Following these developments, two long-term youth policy strategies – the European Union (EU) Youth Strategy (2019-27) and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030 – called for a European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA).

The 3rd EYWC (2020) and (politically) the EU Council resolution on the framework for establishing an EYWA, finally developed such an agenda through a series of thematic priority areas, which formulate the contents and challenges of youth work. The EYWA is thus “a strategic framework strengthening and developing quality and innovation in, and recognition of youth work” (Council of the European Union 2020). With this EYWA and the term “European youth work”, a field of action has been established where European actors, first and foremost the EU and the Council of Europe, set impulses through European policy documents, activities and measures to further develop youth work structurally and in terms of content at different levels – European, national, regional and local.

At the European level, a number of actors – institutions, organisations, agencies, individuals – address the contents of the EYWA. These are primarily the two European institutions – the EU and the Council of Europe – but a first snapshot on the implementation of the EYWA revealed that “all main pillars of the European community of practice (intergovernmental institutions, youth information, youth organisations, researchers, training providers, youth workers) are involved in the process” (Hofmann-van de Poll and Kovačić 2022). During the first years after the 3rd EYWC, it became clear that the breadth and diversity of actors and initiatives at the European level had two important consequences. These were discussed in detail at the second meeting of the European Steering Group (ESG) on the EYWA, which was set up by the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth (Youth Partnership) to bring together the different pillars and actors of the European community of practice.

During these discussions, it became apparent that the number of actors, initiatives, programmes and projects involved in implementing the EYWA is not entirely clear, even for some of the actors themselves. Also, some of the involved actors expressed

the fear that an uncoordinated number of projects, programmes and initiatives could lead to an ineffective use of resources due to overlaps.

The present study addresses these concerns by:

1. providing an inventory of:
 - a. European actors active in implementing the EYWA;
 - b. the initiatives, programmes and projects through which these actors implement the EYWA;
 - c. how these actors interact with each other, that is which communication channels and co-ordination mechanisms they use;
2. analysing the inventory regarding:
 - a. synergies, overlaps, gaps, etc.;
 - b. its meaning towards the implementation of the EYWA, including directions, areas and proposed measures of the main documents of the EYWA.

Thus, the aim of the study “Mapping European youth work ecosystems” is to depict the diversity of actors and their initiatives and highlight thematic overlaps on the one hand and thematic gaps on the other hand by providing a systematic overview of actors and contents. In doing so, the study contributes to the further development of youth work at the European level.

Such an undertaking has not yet taken place at the European level. The present study is therefore intended as a (methodological) starting point – a first layout that can be expanded over time. Mid-term between the 3rd and the 4th EYWCs in 2020 and (expected) 2025 respectively, this paper provides a structural overview of what we call the European youth work ecosystem, namely the complex network of actors at the European level, which contribute to the implementation of the EYWA.

1.1. Methodology

By mapping the European youth work ecosystem, the present study aims to provide a detailed overview of the complex network of actors and their linkages, interactions and exchanges, as well as the topics covered by their activities, measures and strategies.

As its focus is the European youth work ecosystem, this study analyses the ecosystem that emerged on the European level. This implies two things. First, the actions of the actors within the ecosystem are directed towards the development of youth work in Europe as a whole, rather than the development of youth work in single countries. Second, the actors associate themselves and are associated by others with Europe and its institutions, rather than with member states. Thus, the study explicitly focusses on European actors and networks of actors that connect themselves to European policy discussions on youth work. National, regional and local level actors and developments are not taken into account.

Bearing this in mind, the methodology on which this report is based consists of data collection, data analysis and analysis validation.¹

1.1.1. Data collection

The aim of the data collection was to gather information on which actors play a role in the ecosystem and which activities and measures are taken to further develop youth work in Europe. This information was largely collected through desk research and observation. Qualitative, standardised interviews complemented this, based on the assumption that the interviewees would provide information on important activities and measures of which they are aware. Moreover, the interviews provided important insights into co-operation and linkages between the different actors.

To identify the actors of the ecosystem, a snowball-system was used, starting with the ESG on the EYWA. Set by the Youth Partnership, it brings together different pillars and actors of the European community of practice² with the goal of synergising their actions. Represented in the ESG are:

- ▶ the EU;
- ▶ the Council of Europe;
- ▶ the European Youth Forum;
- ▶ the statutory bodies of the Council of Europe (Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) and the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ));
- ▶ national agencies of the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps;

1. For detailed information on the methodological choices and contemplations made, see Atanasov, Dragan/Hofmann-van de Poll, Frederike (2024, forthcoming): Growing youth work in Europe. A national mapping methodology.

2. In the 2020 EU Council resolution, a “community of practice” was defined as “a group of people, professional or non-professional, who share the same interests in resolving an issue, improving their skills, and learning from each other’s experiences. The youth work community of practice comprises stakeholders at all levels from local to European level.” (Council of the European Union 2020).

- ▶ support, advanced learning and training opportunities (SALTO) resource centres;
- ▶ the European Service Centre for the Bonn Process at JUGEND für Europa, the German national agency for Erasmus+ Youth and Sport and the European Solidarity Corps;
- ▶ Eurodesk;
- ▶ ERYICA;
- ▶ youth researchers;
- ▶ youth policy experts;
- ▶ representatives of the community of practice.

During the interviews with the ESG, people were asked for references to other actors in the field. The emerging reference list was then compared and complemented with other European actors present at the 3rd EYWC, such as the European Confederation of Youth Clubs, the International Youth Work Trainers Guild, Rural Youth Europe and Professional Open Youth Work in Europe. These organisations were then contacted for further interviews.

Qualitative semi-structured open interviews were the main source of data collection. The first round of interviews, taking place from December 2022 to January 2023, focused on the members of the ESG. Out of the 21 members of the ESG, 20 people agreed to be interviewed, covering all the representations listed above. During the 60-to-90-minute interviews, questions were asked concerning knowledge of which actors are active in the field, which projects are implemented, what the actors expect from each other and how they interact with each other. A second round of three further interviews took place in January and February 2023. All interviews were recorded and then automatically transcribed via Descript³ for further data processing and analysis.

Parallel to the interviews, desk research and observations took place. During the desk research, information on projects and actors related to the EYWA was collected (from September 2022 to January 2023). Information shared during interviews and observations was looked up and verified, to get a deeper understanding of the overall picture of the European youth work ecosystem.

A third source of data collection were observations during the events organised by the Youth Partnership. The first one, the seminar “Visible Value – strengthening the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda in Eastern and Southeast Europe”,³ took place in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in November 2022. The second was the symposium “Visible Value: Growing youth work in Europe”,⁴ held in May 2023 in Budapest, Hungary. Observations focused on interactions between actors, and ongoing and planned activities and measures. However, there were also some insights on the use of terms like “EYWA” and “Bonn Process”. Relevant insights and observations from other conferences and seminars, for example the Bonn Process Meet-up 2023 (March 2023), the Review Seminar on Recommendation

3. Available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/visible-value-seminar>, accessed 3 August 2023.

4. Available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/symposium-2023>, accessed 3 August 2023.

CM/Rec(2017)4 on Youth Work (April 2023) and the Bonn Process Exchange Forum on National Processes (May 2023), were also taken into account.

1.1.2. Data analysis

Data need to be processed before they can be analysed. The transcribed interview files were coded with MAXQDA®, using a semi-open coding process. Initially, four categories were defined: role of actors, expectations of actors, projects and co-operation. During the coding process, these categories were extended to include understanding of the EYWA, perceptions and expectations for future youth work development. Using qualitative content analysis, the codes were then paraphrased and analysed from February to May 2023. The result of the analysis was not only the desired description and visualisation of the European youth work ecosystem, but also a deeper insight into the co-operation and expectations that the actors have of each other. A first discussion paper was published at the end of May 2023 (Atanasov and Hofmann-van de Poll 2023).

1.1.3. Analysis validation

An important step in the visualisation and analysis of the existing ecosystem is its validation. Validation of the results serves three purposes. First, it helps to identify and verify discrepancies in the data and analysis. Second, it helps to get a clearer or finer picture of the ecosystem by asking the interviewees to comment on the analytical results of the data. Third, validation legitimises the results.

Validation is based on the Delphi method (Häder and Häder 2000). Originally developed for economic forecasting, it is now increasingly used in other disciplines like sociology, psychology and political science as a method “for gaining consensus through controlled feedback from a ... group made up of experts or individuals knowledgeable on the subject” (Taylor 2019). Through a repeating process of questions, answers and analysis, a shared view on a specific content, definition or strategy can be developed.

The validation process for the present study consisted of three steps, each slightly different concerning the target audience. A first validation round took place in January 2023, when the preliminary findings of the study were presented at the third meeting of the ESG on the EYWA in Brussels, Belgium. This place for a face-to-face validation was chosen because the people present were also the people who were interviewed in the first round of interviews. The overall view of the interviews was validated by presenting the preliminary results to the interviewees and putting them up for discussion. The discussions and feedback received at the ESG meeting were incorporated in the analysis and subsequently resulted in a discussion paper (Atanasov and Hofmann-van de Poll 2023).

In a second validation round, the discussion paper was presented during a workshop at the above-mentioned symposium “Visible Value: Growing youth work in Europe”.⁵ Workshop participants were asked to design their image of the existing European

5. Available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/symposium-2023>, accessed 3 August 2023.

youth work ecosystem, which was then compared with the visualisation image prepared by the research team. In the subsequent discussion, differences between the visualisations of the participants and the researchers were discussed. This round of validation allowed the results of the study to be discussed with a group of people from the community of practice beyond the ESG.

A final round of validation took place in writing directly after the symposium. All interviewees were sent the discussion paper with the request to read the description of the European youth work ecosystem and to give their feedback on three questions.

- ▶ Are actors and measures missing?
- ▶ Are actors and measures misplaced?
- ▶ Are there data gaps or blind spots on the engagement of governments and civil society regarding the EYWA implementation?

Nine interviewees took the opportunity to comment on the paper and the findings on the European youth work ecosystem. Their comments have been incorporated into this report, especially in the sections where the self-perception and external perception of the actors' roles are compared.

1.2. Limitations of the study

Like all research studies, both external and internal factors influence the scope of the study. The main external factors are several studies that run in parallel and focus on the implementation of the EYWA. Both the reports on the review of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work (Garcia Lopez and Hofmann-van de Poll 2023) and the yearly survey of the European Service Centre for the Bonn Process on the implementation of the Bonn Process in European countries (Hofmann-van de Poll 2023) focus on national developments but also include findings related to European youth work. Within the network of national agencies for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, two studies are conducted with a focus on Erasmus+. For both studies – the Rural Active Youth (RAY) project on the contribution of Erasmus+ financed projects to the implementation of the EYWA and the evaluation of the strategic national agency co-operations (SNACs) on the implementation of the Bonn Process by the national agencies for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps – no findings have been published yet. Particularly with regard to the first two studies, namely the review and the Bonn Process survey, efforts were made to create synergies. There was a lively exchange between the researchers, and relevant data, results and perspectives were mutually shared.

In the course of the study, another limitation emerged intrinsically from the study itself. The study was intended to not only identify and describe actors and their actions, but also analyse thematic overlaps and gaps. Although in the interviews, questions were asked about thematic foci, it turned out that the interviewees mainly discussed actors and structures. This proved to be an intrinsic limitation of the study, as accordingly, it was not possible to systematically identify and present thematic overlaps and gaps. In some cases, the

researchers observed that the interviewees had difficulties in naming specific measures that were implemented within the framework of the EYWA. This limitation has led to a structural focus of the study. This is also reflected in the analysis categories “definition of the EYWA” and “expectations regarding actors”, which were, following grounded theory, formed on the basis of the interview data.

Finally, a second intrinsic limitation is posed by the choice of methodology. With a primary emphasis on qualitative, guided interviews for data collection – first with the members of the ESG on the EYWA, and then with other individuals proposed by them –, two important considerations must be kept in mind for the purpose of analysis. First, the outcomes of the study do not necessarily reflect the factual reality but rather summarise the perceptions and opinions of interviewees. In some instances, there was a discrepancy in perceptions between how some actors see themselves and how they are seen by others, and in such cases both views are presented. Second, due to the nature of ESG membership, the presented outcomes represent the views of individuals mostly working in European institutions and European-level non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as experts related to research and non-formal education. This means that some stakeholders, such as representatives of regional and local governments or national and local youth organisations and youth workers, are either unequally or not at all represented.

2. History and definition of the European Youth Work Agenda

When discussing European youth work against the background of the EYWA, a short historical overview helps to contextualise the development of the European youth work ecosystem.

2.1. A short history of European youth work development

It is an interesting question where to start with a historical overview of European youth work. Youth work as such has existed in Europe for a long time. As the Youth Partnership's *History of youth work* series⁶ shows, the beginnings of youth work in individual European countries date back more than a century. At the same time, we do not want to focus on youth work in Europe but on European youth work, namely developments at the European level.

For a long time, youth work was no more than a small, not necessarily noteworthy, part of youth policy. The first part of the *History of youth work* series states that “a certain role of youth work in the context of youth activities is recognised, but it is generally not covered in depth nor sufficiently addressed” (Mairesse 2009: 16). This changed with the 1st EYWC, which took place during the Belgian EU-Presidency in Ghent, Belgium, in 2010. This convention displayed the broad diversity of youth work in Europe, while at the same time looking for convergence. Its final declaration⁷ called out to the European institutions to give attention to youth work in their youth policy debates, as well as for them to “build up an agenda, an action plan and the necessary resources for its realisation”. Politically, the 1st EYWC was followed by a stocktaking resolution of the EU Council of Youth Ministers (Council of the European Union 2010), in which the diversity of youth work in Europe was acknowledged while at the same time it was noted that better conditions and more opportunities for youth work should be created at the national and European levels.

Looking at the political documents published after the 1st EYWC, it is evident that youth work still did not have a major political weight compared to other issues but

6. Available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/history-of-youth-work>, accessed 10 November 2023.

7. Available at www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-2803/2010_Declaration_European_youth_work_convention_en.pdf, accessed 10 November 2023.

nevertheless gained in importance. Apart from the *History of youth work* series of the Youth Partnership, Council conclusions and reports on youth work were published mainly in the EU. What these documents largely have in common is that they highlight the role of youth work as a contribution to certain goals (for example development, well-being and social inclusion of young people (Council of the European Union 2013), transitions (European Commission 2015a) and cohesive societies (Council of the European Union 2015)). At the same time, a debate about the quality of youth work was initiated (European Commission 2015b).

In 2015, during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of Europe, the European debates on youth work culminated in the 2nd EYWC, this time in Brussels. Under the motto “Celebrating common ground”, the focus was on the commonalities of youth work traditions in Europe and their intrinsic and extrinsic challenges. The final declaration⁸ called for a European agenda for youth work, including elements such as European co-operation, national legal frameworks for the development of youth work which at the same time recognise local responsibility for youth work, as well as active promotion and advocacy of youth work by all actors. Many of these elements have been taken up politically in the Council of Europe recommendation on youth work (Council of Europe 2017), which is considered the first European policy document to focus on the development of youth work as such, rather than on the contributions youth work can make to achieving societal goals.

At the same time, the 2nd EYWC is considered a turning point in the European discourse on youth work. Since then, a large number of policy documents and reports, as well as academic studies, have been produced, dealing with both the situation of youth work as such and its contribution to solving societal goals (cf. Hofmann-van de Poll et al. 2020). It is therefore not surprising that the 3rd EYWC, which was held online in December 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and overlapped with the German EU Council of Europe Presidency, took up these topics and focused on the (further) development of youth work in eight thematic priority areas (See: Table 1.).⁹ A Council resolution of the EU (Council of the European Union 2020) preceded the convention. The Council resolution proposes concrete steps on how youth work can be further developed through an EYWA. The process of implementing the agenda is referred to in the resolution as the “Bonn Process”, after the city where the 3rd EYWC was organised.

A lot has happened since then. In the member states as well as at the European level, processes have been initiated that aim to further develop and strengthen youth work – in the sense of implementing the agenda. At the same time, it quickly became apparent in the interviews that the many different new terms, such as EYWA, Bonn Process or community of practice, caused a lack of understanding. Despite the definitions in the policy documents, particularly

8. Available at https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262187/The+2nd+European+Youth+Work+Declaration_FINAL.pdf/cc602b1d-6efc-46d9-80ec-5ca57c35eb85, accessed 10 November 2023.

9. Available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/eywc-2020> and www.bonn-process.net/context/eywa/.

practitioners in the European Steering Group had difficulties explaining and relating to the terms, interpreting them in their own way. In the context of this research, it is therefore first necessary to clarify the meaning of these terms and in particular the core term EYWA.

2.2. The European Youth Work Agenda defined

In the EU Council resolution adopted in 2020 on the eve of the 3rd EYWC, the EYWA is described as “a strategic framework for strengthening and developing quality and innovation in, and recognition of youth work” (Council of the European Union 2020). The agenda consists of four elements, namely the EU Youth Strategy (2019-27) (Council of the EU 2018) and the Youth Sector Strategy 2030 of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2020) as a political basis; European funding programmes as facilitators of the implementation process; a co-operation with the youth work community of practice both in the member states and at European level; and finally the “Bonn Process” as a process of implementing the agenda (Council of the EU 2020). Even though the EU Council resolution was only adopted by the 27 member states of the EU (and thus “only” by 27 of the then 47 countries of the Council of Europe), these elements or building blocks of the agenda have a certain general validity for Europe, as they were taken up in the 3rd EYWC. As its final declaration “Signposts for the future” states: “The 3rd European Youth Work Convention has aimed explicitly at putting flesh on the bones of the European Youth Work Agenda, while respecting its political framework, and describing future steps, actions and measures to be taken under the Bonn process”.¹⁰ The Council of Europe Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) welcomed the final declaration at its meeting in March 2021 and confirmed its will to actively participate in the process of implementing the EYWA by inviting all its member states “to participate actively in the implementation process of the EYWA (“Bonn Process”)” (Council of Europe 2021). Thus, the EYWA can be considered as the first youth work policy relevant in the whole of Europe as a continent, and for all levels and actors, including institutions and organisations on European, national, regional and local levels.

Based on these documents and decisions, it can be assumed that the EYWA is a framework and a process that aims to strengthen and (further) develop youth work in Europe. This is to some extent confirmed by the members of the ESG on the EYWA. According to them, the EYWA was born out of previous processes set in motion by the EU and the Council of Europe. In the interviews, civil society members of the ESG observed that there has been a lack of synchronisation between the Council of Europe and the European Union, particularly the European Commission over the years. According to them, both institutions were doing similar work in relation to youth work, but separately from each other. Processes such as the previous youth work conventions from 2010 and 2015 and the Council of Europe recommendation on youth work (2017) led to some convergence.

However, the reflection on these processes still shows a difference between those ESG members more associated with the European Union and those associated with

10. Ibid.

the Council of Europe. While for the former, the agenda, being referred to as the EU Council resolution of 2020, often stood out as a major achievement, for the latter, the agenda, being the declaration of the 3rd EYWC in 2020, was more often seen as one of various milestones in a much longer process, albeit an important one.

When asked about their understanding of the EYWA, most stakeholders represented in the ESG clearly see it as a framework with a guiding character that contributes to reaching a common understanding of youth work in Europe. Having a guiding character, most interviewees acknowledge and respect the non-mandatory nature of the EU Resolution on the framework of the EYWA as well as of the final declaration of the 3rd EYWC. However, despite this knowledge they point out that implementation is difficult *because of* this non-mandatory nature. As such, the agenda is not something that needs to be implemented. Rather, its value lies in the agenda providing space to different stakeholders to discuss and acknowledge issues, agree on joint priorities and set a common direction for the future of European youth work. This seems however to contradict the wording of the EU Council resolution, which clearly defines the resolution as a framework for establishing the EYWA, with the process of implementation and “putting into practice” being called the Bonn Process. Stakeholders point out that these different wordings and understandings contribute to ambiguity surrounding the EYWA. To what extent this ambiguity is merely a linguistic rather than a discursive difference, as was pointed out by one of the interviewees, remains to be discussed. Either way, these differences point towards substantive disagreements on what to do with the EYWA.

The non-mandatory, guiding character of the agenda, and its lacking mechanisms of implementation and evaluation, make the agenda something that is “good to be involved in” but not necessarily something that policy makers have to work on. This lack of commitment, which many stakeholders ascribe both to the two European institutions as well as national governments, is accompanied by an attested lack of ownership from the youth work community of practice. While there seems to be an agreement that the agenda should be based on the needs and interests of youth workers, some of the interviewees questioned the level to which they have been involved in the design and implementation of the agenda so far.

2.2.1. Bonn Process and the community of practice

Before turning towards the European youth work ecosystem, a quick word has to be said about the two other terminological ambiguities that have been identified in the study, namely the Bonn Process and the community of practice.

The Bonn Process ambiguity relates to the Bonn Process as the name of the overall process of implementing the EYWA. As pointed out by some interviewees, already in preparation for the 3rd EYWC, there had been discussions whether or not the process of implementing the EYWA would need a distinctive name or not. With both the EU Council resolution (Council of the European Union 2020) as well as the report of the Council of Europe CMJ (Council of Europe 2021) referring to the implementation of the agenda as the Bonn Process, this discussion was resolved at least on paper. However, the discussions both in the ESG as well as in the community of practice show that the term Bonn Process is used reluctantly by many actors, who prefer “implementation

of the EYWA” as to not to introduce too many different terminologies. Some of the interviewees pointed out that the different terminology may be one of the reasons why the Bonn Process and the EYWA meet hesitation at the national and local levels. This view has been confirmed by the findings of the survey preparing for the Bonn Process Exchange Forum on National Processes (Hofmann-van de Poll 2023). The debate about the understanding of the Bonn Process, in combination with the above-mentioned perception that the EYWA is not a document or checklist that can be implemented concretely, leads to a discussion whether the Bonn Process is rather a process for the further development of youth work in Europe than an implementation process. The observations at the Bonn Process Exchange Forum on National Processes and the Visible Value symposium “Growing youth work in Europe” indicate that the tendency is towards understanding in terms of development of youth work rather than implementation.

A second ambiguity that emerged from the interviews was that of the term community of practice. First defined by Etienne Wenger (1998) as a group of people in mutual engagement, following a joint enterprise and with a shared repertoire, it was coined by Yael Ohana in the context of European youth work as:

being made up of all those actors and stakeholders who consider themselves part of the European youth work sector, including, among others, youth leaders, project carriers, youth organisations, ministries responsible for youth and civil servants responsible for youth policy, European institutions and their programmes of youth work support, National Agencies of the Erasmus+ and other youth-relevant education and mobility programmes, multipliers and youth activists associated with the institutional programmes, trainers and their representative associations or the pools they form and even young people themselves. (Ohana 2020).

Modified versions of this definition were included in the EU Council resolution (Council of the EU 2020) and in the final declaration of the 3rd EYWC. Combining these two definitions, the European youth work community of practice is: “a group of people, professional or non-professional, who share the same interests in resolving an issue, improving their skills, and learning from each other’s experiences. The youth work community of practice comprises stakeholders at all levels from local to European level” (Council of the European Union 2020), including “youth workers and youth leaders, youth work managers, project carriers, accredited and independent youth work organisations, trainers, researchers, educators of youth workers, local communities and municipalities, National Agencies for Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps, youth representations, young people, and policy makers at all levels of governance” (final declaration 2020).

With this compiled definition, one would think that the meaning of the term is clear. At the same time, the interviews revealed that the term contributes to confusion. Many of the interviewees use the term community of practice in general but refer to NGOs and youth workers in particular. This became particularly clear at the points where the community of practice was largely accused of inactivity in the implementation of the EYWA, which when asked was then specified as European youth organisations as well as national and local youth work organisations. In this respect, the results of the study indicate that the terms “practice” and “practitioners” merge, especially among non-native English speakers. To avoid further confusion, this study distinguishes

between the terms community of practice – in the sense of the above definition all stakeholders committed to the development of (European) youth work – and community of practitioners, when referring to those involved in doing youth work, for example youth organisations and youth workers. Differentiating between these two terms is not only of linguistic and content-related importance but also questions how belonging is determined. One is considered to be part of the “community of practice” by simply doing something related to youth work, without necessarily having the intention to be part of it; whereas being part of the “community of practitioners” is a matter of conscious decision and related to a feeling of belonging.

With the differences and ambiguities in definition and reason for the agenda, it makes sense to take a closer look at the actors implementing the EYWA at the European level, their projects as well as their interactions, that is to take a closer look at the European youth work ecosystem.

3. The European youth work ecosystem

The use of the term ecosystem originates in biology, where it refers to “the complex of living organisms, their physical environment, and all their interrelationships in a particular unit of space” (Britannica 2022). As a metaphor, it has found its way in other sciences as well, referring to, in its most simple way, “any complicated system consisting of many different people, processes, activities, etc., and the way that they affect each other” (Cambridge Dictionary 2023).

In the following section, the relevance of ecosystem theory for this study is explained and then, based on the findings of the methodological data collection methods (desk research, interviews with the ESG and validation of the findings), the European youth work ecosystem is presented.

3.1. Ecosystem theory

Although the ecosystem concept originated in biology, it has long been used as a metaphor in other disciplines. In psychology, it is primarily Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner 1979) and his analysis of the ecosystem of human (especially child) development that is relevant to the present study.

According to Bronfenbrenner, children are influenced in their development through a surrounding ecosystem, which in itself consists of four systems. These microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems are constructed by norms, rules and roles. The units of analysis in the microsystem are the individual areas of the whole ecosystem. These are, for example, home or childcare with regard to children. The mesosystem looks at the interactions between different microsystems, for example the interaction between home and school. The exosystem does not directly influence children but does influence the mesosystem, for example the parents’ workplace. Finally, the macrosystem has an influence on all systems and shows, for example, how other systems (family, school or neighbourhood) function.

Applying this theory to European youth work, one obtains different units of analysis to look at the intricacies of the youth work ecosystem. The microsystem would mirror the different actors active in the EYWA, whereas the mesosystem would focus on the interactions between them. The exosystem pays attention to the frameworks that influence the mesosystem, for example the set of norms, rules and roles that govern the interactions taking place at the mesosystem. This may be a co-operation agreement or a general youth strategy framing such interactions. The macrosystem

would analyse how other sectors (employment, school, etc.) influence the micro-, meso- and exosystem. Thus, following Bronfenbrenner's theory, a European youth work ecosystem would consist of four levels of analysis, namely the actors, their interactions, political strategies that govern these interactions, and other sectors.

However, Bronfenbrenner's theory is not the only one using the ecosystem metaphor. Of particular interest in the present study is the concept of organisational or business ecosystems, where it is "used to reference networked social structures in which units are linked by loose or tight ties that enable or enhance the interactions and exchanges among diverse organisations and actors" (Mars and Bronstein 2018). This definition of ecosystem helps to clarify some elements to be considered in a youth work ecosystem study, namely networks, ties between single units of the networks, interactions and exchanges, and diverse organisations and actors.

They roughly refer to Bronfenbrenner's four levels of analysis, with organisations and actors as the microsystem, the interactions and exchanges as the mesosystem, the ties between single units of networks as the exosystem, and finally the networks as the macrosystem.

Against the background of the biological concept of the ecosystem, Mars and Bronstein (Mars and Bronstein 2018; Mars, Bronstein and Lush 2012) provide a few important assumptions to be considered when analysing organisational ecosystems.

First, ecosystems are emerging rather than being designed, and as such, they can develop. This means that an ecosystem must also be analysed regarding its birth and development, including changing roles of actors over the years.

Second, the mere existence of an ecosystem does not mean it is healthy, functional and persistent. In the analysis, this raises questions towards its functioning and the expectations actors have of the ecosystem.

Third, the key element of biological ecosystems is the interaction between single actors. This interaction leads to the emergence of an ecosystem. When analysing organisational ecosystems, or in this case a youth work ecosystem, a particular focus should thus be laid on the interaction, synergies and overlaps between the actions of single actors.

Summarising, ecosystem theories frame the present study in two ways. First, they present a framework for defining and describing the youth work ecosystem in place, focusing not only on actors but also on interactions, programmes and activities. Second, they help to frame questions for analysis, for example how the youth work ecosystem emerged, to what extent (and under which conditions) the existing youth work ecosystem is healthy, functional and persistent, what expectations actors have towards the ecosystem, and how actors within the ecosystem interact.

Taking the above theoretical concepts into account, we define the European youth work ecosystem as follows: the complex network of actors – institutions, organisations, agencies, individuals – at the European level, that contribute to strengthening and developing youth work by implementing the EYWA, as well as their linkages, interactions and exchanges among each other.

3.2. The ecosystem: actors, roles and projects

Following this rather general definition of the European youth work ecosystem, the present section describes the actors in more detail, giving particular attention to the roles and some examples of projects they conduct in the framework of the EYWA. The description follows the view as perceived by the majority of the interviewees. However, as was subsequently shown in the validation (see the methodology), in some cases this does not correspond to the self-perception of the actors. Both perspectives are included in the sections below. The groups of actors that the members of the ESG identify as being active in the European youth work ecosystem are the European institutions, national governments and civil society.

3.2.1. European institutions

The EU and the Council of Europe are considered the most important stakeholders of the EYWA, along with bodies and institutions that are part of, or associated with them. Within the EU, this is mostly the European Commission and more specifically the youth unit in the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC). At the Council of Europe, the youth department is taking this role. Both institutions are credited with the will to establish a common agenda to synchronise their efforts in the field of youth work, thus preventing further overlaps and competition. In fact, this has already been acknowledged in the documents initially adopted by both sides in relation to the EYWA. In the final decisions of its 44th meeting, the CMJ of the Council of Europe “welcomed and reconfirmed its wish to strengthen the co-operation between the Council of Europe and the European Commission in the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA)” (Council of Europe 2021). Meanwhile, the EU’s 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 EYWA (2020/C 415/01), among other things, also aims to “strengthen cooperation both between Member States and the Council of Europe and between the respective institutions in order to support the development of quality youth work across Europe”. In that respect, the interviewees generally confirm that both institutions are taking concrete steps in line with those intentions.

When it comes to concrete action however, both institutions are criticised for limiting their actions. Members of the ESG link very few activities of the two institutions directly to the agenda implementation: whereas the youth unit of the European Commission established an expert group to design a digital youth work platform, the youth department of the Council of Europe has as its major project the review of its Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work. Furthermore, both organisations participate in the ESG as well as events regarding the EYWA. The lack of other concrete activities fuels criticism that both institutions have largely withdrawn their visible commitment when adopting the agenda and have handed over their initially active role to the Youth Partnership. Since the interviews and validation workshops were conducted in the first half of 2023, the involvement of both the European Commission and the Council of Europe has become more visible, as for example a proposal for the development of a dedicated youth work platform (European Commission 2023) and the Council of Europe review on Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 were published.

Those parts of the two institutions that are set up by them or work on their behalf, such as for the EU the national agencies and the SALTO resource centres, and for the Council of Europe the European Youth Foundation, are regarded by most ESG members as autonomous organisational units, even though the frameworks and working plans of these institutions have the approval of the Commission. In this sense, a distinction is made between the executive level (that is the national agencies, the European Youth Foundation) and the steering level (that is the youth unit of DG EAC and the Council of Europe youth department). The criticism of not being visible or active enough is directed at the steering level. The results regarding the executive level will be presented later in this section.

Looking at the EU, the main concern of the members of the ESG is that the EU's involvement is concentrated on the youth unit within the DG EAC of the European Commission. Some other bodies of the EU, such as the DGs for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), Regional and Urban Policy (DG REG) and Education and Culture (DG EAC, apart from the already involved youth unit) in the European Commission, but also the European Parliament, are considered to be of great importance for strengthening and developing youth work, although their work in that direction is hardly visible. An engagement of these bodies could bring the agenda a decisive step forward. While there is awareness that the complexity of the EU and its structures is a challenge for its greater involvement, there is some level of agreement that the implementation process would be very different if the European Commission would use its influence and decision-making power for the agenda. Recently, there have been developments of this kind, like the publication of the Committee of the Regions report on the implementation of the Bonn Process at local and regional level in the EU (European Committee of the Regions 2024).

Similarly, a greater and more visible involvement of the Council of Europe is desired, although it is acknowledged that its main bodies, the European Steering Committee for Youth, the Advisory Council on Youth and the Joint Committee on Youth, are actively discussing the EYWA. For the Council of Europe, it is argued that compared to the European Union, and more specifically the European Commission, it has very few (personnel and financial) resources at its disposal to be actively involved in the agenda. It is also acknowledged that the Council of Europe has less influence on its member states in comparison to the EU, so it has less potential to impact the agenda implementation on the national level. In addition, the involvement of the Council of Europe is more often seen in relation to its Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work, which is perceived more as the main policy guidelines for the organisation's work on this topic, in contrast to the agenda itself, which is perceived as more related to the EU.

Both institutions have pointed out during the validation that they consider themselves to be more directly involved in the implementation of the EYWA as compared to the general picture outlined by the ESG. First, this is done through the EU Youth Strategy and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030, which both mention youth work as a priority. Moreover, the EU has a work plan on youth, which for 2022 to 2024 is making several references to the EYWA. Second, both institutions actively steer the funding of youth work projects, through the national agencies in case of the EU and through the European Youth Foundation in case of the Council of

Europe. Asked for their contribution to the EYWA, both institutions pointed out the contributions through the funding programmes, stipulating the amounts of money, training courses, etc. used to implement the EYWA. Third, from the point of view of both institutions, the fact that the Youth Partnership has taken on a co-ordinating role at the European level is not a withdrawal from the subject area but an active attempt to combine forces and to advance the agenda through research and events organised by the Youth Partnership. The Youth Partnership is a project between the two institutions. Its bi-annual work plan is agreed upon by the institutions, which have the responsibility of setting the priorities and monitoring the implementation.

The members of the ESG, however, see the Youth Partnership as an autonomous actor, which brings together the interests of the European Commission and the Council of Europe but still acts independently. As such, in the view of the members of the ESG, the Youth Partnership is attributed the main co-ordinating role for the agenda. It creates the context in which everything related to the agenda – on the European level – is happening. However, in the eyes of the interviewees, it has taken time for the Youth Partnership to take on and grow in this role. Nowadays, the Youth Partnership is attributed to having an overview of the implementation process on the European level by organising events (for example the Visible Value seminars), commissioning the development of support materials and research (for example a youth knowledge book on youth work strategies; a study on cross-border recognition of youth workers' skills and competences; an analytical paper analysing youth work policy), sharing information and supporting initiatives of the two partner institutions. However, despite an increased budget and the creation of a special position for the implementation of the EYWA in the Youth Partnership team, there is a widespread belief among members of the ESG that the Youth Partnership has limited resources and that with the current capacities, it is not able to live up to its potential.

The role of the Youth Partnership as perceived by the interviewees seems to be more extensive compared to what was initially attributed to the Youth Partnership in the documents adopted by the EU and the Council of Europe in relation to the EYWA. In the EU Council Resolution 2020/C 415/01, the EU invited the European Commission to “ensure synergies with other international organisations and reinforce the existing partnership with the Council of Europe when implementing the agenda through complementary and coordinated action”, stating that “the EU–Council of Europe partnership in the youth field could be assigned a central role in ensuring synergies and in facilitating dialogue for youth workers” (Council of the European Union 2020). In the final decisions of its 44th meeting, the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) of the Council of Europe “invited the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth to consult the youth work community of practice on the Partnership’s future role in furthering the EYWA” (Council of Europe 2021). Since the interviews were held at the end of 2022 and beginning of 2023, the role of the Youth Partnership evolved into a hub for information, research, and the mapping of the process of the European Youth Work Agenda. The fact that the Youth Partnership is now meeting the expectations placed on it is demonstrated, for example, by the EU Council resolution on youth work policy in an empowering Europe. The resolution states that the European Commission should be “[c]onsidering coordinated and structural investment by the Partnership in steering the Bonn

Process forward and ensuring synergies and connections between the partnership and other actors contributing to and supporting the Bonn process” (Council of the European Union 2024, paragraph 67a).

The funding programmes of both institutions – Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps for the EU, and the European Youth Foundation for the Council of Europe – are considered to be only partially aligned with the agenda. Whereas the EU funding programmes are closely aligned to the EU Youth Strategy, the European Youth Foundation follows the Council of Europe youth sector priorities as listed in its Youth Sector Strategy 2030. In the documents adopted in relation to the EYWA, both institutions anticipated closer ties between their strategies and funding programmes with the agenda. With the decisions of the 44th meeting of the CMJ, the Council of Europe set up a high-level task force “to examine the final declaration with a view to implementing concrete measures within the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030” (Council of Europe 2021). In its Council Resolution 2020/C 415/01, the EU invites the European Commission to “explore the possibilities under which the EU funding programmes, such as Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps, could actively contribute, where appropriate, to the implementation of the agenda using the programmes’ different funding instruments” (Council of the European Union 2020).

There are varying opinions as to the extent to which this has been achieved. Although youth work is accordingly a priority in both funding instruments, stakeholders believe that the EYWA as such is not. Especially for the EU funding programmes, stakeholders complain that this should be realigned by the European Commission so that it can be a greater mechanism for stronger support of the agenda implementation. In contrast, the 2024 published interim evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy points out the important role of the EU youth funding programmes in supporting quality youth work and the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda (European Commission 2024).

Although stakeholders acknowledge that within the programmes of both institutions, projects can be and are undertaken that are linked to the agenda and its thematic priorities, at the same time it is criticised that there have been no new types of funds and financial instruments to provide a more extensive support. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the programme documents (such as programme guides) have not been updated to include appropriate references to the EYWA, so youth organisations are not even directed into using already existing funding streams to implement projects supporting the agenda. Since these interviews and the subsequent validation workshops, the EYWA has become more prominent in the Erasmus+ programme. In the Erasmus+ Programme Guide of 2022, there were three references to the EYWA, whereas in the 2024 guide, the number of references had increased to seven. As of 2023, the Erasmus+ centralised action “European Youth Together” continuously supports the implementation of the EYWA.

However, in the self-perception of representatives of institutions working directly on implementing the funding programmes of the two institutions, the programmes make an important contribution to the agenda implementation since they are already supporting many projects that directly contribute to the eight thematic priority areas.

The national agencies, although closely related to the EU as the executive of the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes, are perceived as important actors at the European level. There is a clear dichotomy between some national agencies which are seen as taking a more prominent role in the EYWA, and the majority of national agencies which keep a lower profile. The perception of the more active national agencies is mostly related to their co-ordinating role in SNACs supporting the agenda implementation, while less high-profile national agencies have a more supporting role. These SNACs are essentially co-operations among the national agencies. Currently, there are seven SNACs related to youth work.¹¹ As such, they are perceived as being strongly self-led and self-co-ordinated, focusing on co-operation among the national agencies and among actors they chose to involve in these projects. However, their work is closely related to, and their work plan is approved by, the European Commission. In the community of practice, the powerful role of the national agencies in the agenda is perceived in two ways, as was made clear both in the interviews and during the observations. While their commitment is appreciated in general, their disproportionate leadership in the process is hesitantly accepted. Especially in countries where the national agencies do not play a major role or do not exist, the large role of the national agencies in the EYWA is viewed with caution.

During the validation process, representatives of national agencies disagreed with the perception that some national agencies are more active than others. Many national agencies are involved as partners in the SNACs, being active without having a prominent role. Furthermore, other ongoing strategic co-operations can at least be partly linked to the eight thematic priority areas, without being considered as part of the EYWA. On a national level, some of the national agencies have also taken the role of co-ordinating the national working groups for the EYWA, even though their role is mostly to support other stakeholders, and not to take initiatives at the national level.

Similar to the national agencies, the SALTO resource centres also play an important role in the further development of the goals of the EYWA. An example is the development of the European training strategy, its competence model for youth workers and its training courses implemented by the SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre. Connected to this, a voluntary certificate for trainers of youth workers is to be piloted.

On the side of the Council of Europe, a structure that is perceived as involved in the implementation of the agenda to some extent is the platform of youth centres that have been awarded with the Council of Europe quality label for youth centres. Many of the youth centres were involved in the 3rd EYWC and some of them have been co-operating more closely since, setting up various co-operation projects to foster the EYWA.

11. The seven SNACs are: Digital Youth Work (on digital transformation, digital competence, youth work and innovation); Education and Training for Youth Workers (on youth work, competences and policy shaping); Europe Goes Local (on youth work and local engagement); European Academy in Youth Work (on youth work, quality development, innovation and policy shaping); Growing Youth Work (on youth work, policy shaping and neighbouring countries); Youth @ Work (on youth employability, social entrepreneurship, youth work and cross-sectoral co-operation); and Mental Health in Youth Work (on mental health, youth work, mental competencies and social inclusion).

3.2.2. National governments

Turning from the two European institutions and its linked bodies and organisations to the national governments – which play a considerable institutional role both in the framework of the EU (Youth Working Party) and the Council of Europe (CDEJ) –, the general view among the members of the ESG is that only a few governments are involved on the European level nowadays. There is a very low level of awareness and interest among the others. The reason may lie in the different realities of the countries. It is assumed that countries with well-established youth work structures feel that they do not need the agenda, while countries with no or only few structures do not have the possibilities to implement the agenda.

However, national governments in most countries are co-ordinating the national working groups for the agenda (Hofmann-van de Poll 2023), making them – at least for some of the interviewees – among the most active stakeholders. Some members of the ESG discussed that the issue is not that national governments are not doing enough but that national NGOs perceive a lack of political will and support on the part of national governments.

The European Service Centre for the Bonn Process was a project initiated by the German federal youth ministry within JUGEND für Europa, the German national agency for Erasmus+ Youth and Sport and the European Solidarity Corps, which ran from 2021 to October 2023. The idea of this European Service Centre was to support the youth work community of practice in implementing the EYWA in the first phase after the 3rd EYWC, especially by supporting national implementation processes through communication, information sharing, the creation of opportunities for exchange among the community, the provision of information material and the support of national co-ordinators. Most of its responsibilities have been taken over by the SNAC on strengthening youth work in Europe by supporting the implementation of the EYWA.

The European Service Centre was, both in its setup as well in its doing, perceived by most members of the ESG as a German agency, which is clear from statements like “what the Germans are doing with the service centre”, despite the centre taking a European approach in the way it gives support. Its creation is seen as a follow-up effort of the German federal government to push the agenda forward after its EU and Council of Europe Presidency was over. It is clear from the observations that this supporting role is very much welcomed by stakeholders in other member states, especially in non-EU states, as there is no other institution at the European level that supports the development of national processes.

The members of the ESG, most notably government officials, representatives of national agencies as well as civil society organisations, generally assess the establishment of the centre as a positive development, given the lack of co-ordination and leadership by European institutions and other governments following the 3rd EYWC. Nevertheless, it is stipulated that there is confusion as to what role the Bonn Service Centre plays in the agenda, also and especially in comparison to the Youth Partnership. With the closure of the Bonn Service Centre in October 2023, this confusion should have come to an end. The supporting role of the service centre has largely

been taken over by the SNAC “Growing Youth Work”, while the co-ordinating role has been taken over by the Youth Partnership (Council of the European Union 2024).

3.2.3. Civil society

When considering the role of civil society with regard to the EYWA, the results are quite mixed. The perception is that the process has not yet arrived in the youth work field and among youth workers and youth organisations. This also applies to (umbrella) organisations active at the European level. Here, the activity of some organisations – European Youth Forum, ERYICA, Eurodesk and some others¹² – is acknowledged but at the same time it is critically observed that their involvement is mostly limited to participating in the ESG, some seminars and conferences and/or following the process.

Although hardly any of these organisations have started their own projects on the implementation of the EYWA, some interviewees point out that the work of these organisations in general contributes to the further development of the field of youth work and thus to the goals of the agenda. Examples are the adoption of the competency frameworks for “youth information worker” and for “Eurodesk mobility advisor”, carried out by ERYICA and Eurodesk.

The work of national associations of youth workers, which in many cases have taken over ownership of the agenda at the national level and are carrying out their own projects to support the agenda, is evaluated positively. In particular, the co-operation of several national associations in two Erasmus+ strategic partnerships should be mentioned. One project, “European youth workers unite to empower youth and youth field – Youth worker is a lifestyle”, accompanies the process of the establishment of a European association of youth workers. The second project, “The future of youth workers”, aims at designing a proposal for a European training for youth workers.

Although not the focus of the study, the involvement of other national and local youth organisations is generally seen as non-existent, which is attributed to the detachment of the agenda from the local grassroots level. Hence, youth organisations and youth workers not involved in European-level events are often not even aware of the agenda and its meaning. Similarly, other stakeholders from the civil society, such as universities and researchers, are also seen as not involved in the agenda implementation. Recent research took into account national, regional and local initiatives, thus displaying a large range of activities that were not covered in this research, which took a European focus (Hofmann-van de Poll 2023; Committee of the Regions 2024).

3.3. Visualisation of the European youth work ecosystem

The description of the European youth work ecosystem as presented above can be visualised in a rudimentary mapping.

12. There are many more European non-governmental youth organisations active in the European Youth Work Agenda, but these organisations were the ones mentioned by the members of the European Steering Group in the interviews. This may not be surprising, as the European Youth forum, ERYICA and Eurodesk are part of the European Steering Group.

Figure 1: Visualisation of the actors in the European youth work ecosystem

Figure 1 shows an ecosystem consisting of several groups of actors and several rings of involvement. The four groups of actors are the two European institutions (the EU and the Council of Europe), governments and civil society. Within each of these groups of actors, there are institutions, organisations and actors which are involved in the EYWA more closely and those who are not. They are organised along three circles, representing their level of involvement. However, this visualisation only shows which actors are active and to what extent. It says nothing about the relationships between the actors or how their involvement is shaped. Despite the importance of the European Youth Work Conventions, they are not mentioned in the figure as it shows the ecosystem of stakeholders, rather than events.

At the core of the ecosystem are the Youth Partnership as the institutionalised co-operation between the two European institutions, the ESG for the EYWA established by it, as well as the European Service Centre for the Bonn Process, located within JUGEND für Europa, the German national agency for Erasmus+ Youth and Sport, and the European Solidarity Corps (now predominantly the SNAC on strengthening youth work in Europe by supporting the implementation of the EYWA).

A second circle shows actors which explicitly dedicate and attribute (part of) their work to the agenda. Besides parts of the two European institutions, such as the respective youth departments as well as their committees in which member states and international NGOs meet, there are also some national governments as well as national youth worker associations. According to the interviewees, some individuals also play a prominent role in the development and implementation of the EYWA.

Finally, the outer rim is formed by civil society organisations, governments and the organs of the Council of Europe and the EU, which may show an interest in the EYWA, sometimes due to commitments made in European youth policy co-ordination structures but which are not necessarily committed to carrying out specific actions.

3.4. European youth work projects

Even though the focus of this study is on the actors and structures of the EYWA and thus the European youth work ecosystem, it is also possible to draw some conclusions about the projects that are contributing to further youth work development at the European level. Within the framework of this study, no systematic research was carried out on these projects – it was only asked in the interviews whether the interviewees knew of projects, both in their own organisation and in other organisations. The projects listed in Table 1 therefore do not claim to be exhaustive. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the youth work development projects mentioned in the interviews represent the range of projects that are carried out at the European level.

The scope of what is considered a project in this case is very wide, including adoption of policy documents (or revision of existing ones), organisation of events, establishing bodies, conducting research and very few projects as specific sets of activities implemented within a given timeframe. This is due to the fact that most interviewees came from institutions and organisations working on a policy development level, rather than on an implementation level. That being said, this does not mean that there are no other projects being implemented by other stakeholders which are

contributing to the EYWA. In fact, it was often stated that there are projects funded by the Erasmus+ and the European Youth Foundation that fall within the eight priority areas. Nevertheless, the projects listed below were the only ones explicitly named by the interviewees.

Further research shows that there is also a considerable amount of activity in the member states with a range of projects that are being carried out in the eight thematic priority areas (Hofmann-van de Poll 2023). Interestingly, within member states, the focus lies on quality development, promotion and recognition, whereas at the European level, there seems to be a general focus on policy and framework development, as well as creating spaces for the community of practice to meet and discuss. However, quality development too seems to be an area in which much activity is taking place.

Tables 1-8: European projects on the eight thematic priority areas of the European Youth Work Agenda

1. Develop and expand the youth work offer

European Union

European Commission	Erasmus+ programme
National Agencies	SNAC Digital Youth Work
Council of the EU Youth Ministers	Conference “Youth work and Democracy” (Brussels, Belgium, February 2024)

Council of Europe

European Youth Foundation	European Youth Foundation
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2. Quality development

European Union

SALTO Resource Centres	European Training Strategy for youth work
National Agencies	SNAC Europe Goes Local
Erasmus+ Projects (KA2*)	The Future of Youth Workers

Youth Partnership

Youth Partnership	Peer learning activity on Higher Education of Youth Workers (20-23 September 2022, Helsinki, Finland)
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NGOs and networks Council of Europe

Quality-labelled youth centres	Youth centres and safe space
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NGOs and networks

Eurodesk	European competence framework for youth information workers (together with ERYICA)
ERYICA	Training courses on youth information work

KA2* Key Action 2:

Cooperation among organisations and institutions within Erasmus+

3. A common direction for the youth work community of practice

European Union

European Commission	Digital platform on youth work
National Agencies	Offenburg talks SNAC EYWA Bonn Process meet-up (European Service Centre on the Bonn Process) Bonn Process Exchange Forum on National Processes (European Service Centre on the Bonn Process)

Youth Partnership

Youth Partnership	Regional seminar Visible Value – strengthening the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda in Eastern and Southeast Europe (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15-16 November 2022) Visible Value: Growing youth work in Europe (Budapest, Hungary, 31 May – 1 June 2023)
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National Governments

Germany	European Service Centre for the Bonn Process (2021-2023) 3rd European Youth Work Convention
Malta	4th European Youth Work Convention (May 2025)

4. Beyond the youth work community of practice

European Union

National Agencies	Youth@Work Partnership on Youth Employability and Entrepreneurship
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5. Promotion and recognition

European Union

European Commission	Youthpass
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Youth Partnership

Youth Partnership	Study on the recognition of youth workers' competences
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6. Innovation and emerging challenges

European Union

National Agencies	SNAC European Academy on Youth Work
RAY Network	Youth work Recovery Conference (Helsinki, Finland, 13-16 June) Analysis on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth work

7. Policy frameworks

European Union

European Commission	EU Youth Strategy mid-term review
Council of the EU Youth Ministers	Resolution on the EYWA EU Youth Strategy

Youth Partnership

Youth Partnership	Analytical paper on youth work policies Youth knowledge book on developing youth work strategies
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Council of Europe

Committee of Ministers	Recommendation CM(Rec)2017/4 on youth work Council of Europe youth sector strategy 2030
Joint Council on Youth (CMJ)	Review of the Recommendation on youth work
Congress of local and regional authorities	Resolution 463 (2021) Youth work: the role of local and regional authorities

8. A strategic framework for youth work development

European Union

National Agencies	<u>The European Youth Work Agenda</u>
Erasmus+ Projects (KA2*)	<u>European youth workers unite to empower youth and youth field – Youth worker is a lifestyle</u>

Youth Partnership

Youth Partnership	<u>European Steering Group on the European Youth Work Agenda</u> Mapping on European youth work ecosystems
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KA2* Key Action 2:

Cooperation among organisations and institutions within Erasmus+

9. Others

Youth Partnership

Youth Partnership	Pool of experts on youth work Publications on youth work
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NGOs and networks

Eurodesk	Competence Framework of Eurodesk Mobility Advisors
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4. Expectations: an ideal ecosystem

The ecosystem described so far represents the situation of European youth work as described by the members of the ESG, including self-perception and perception of others of the role and functioning of different actors. It is an “as-is” state but one that many interviewees found unsatisfactory. Accordingly, expectations were placed on actors. Analysing these expectations, a clear shift becomes visible, especially regarding the interactions between the actors. This chapter presents how, according to the perceptions of interviewees, the ecosystem should look like in the future.

4.1. The role of the actors in an ideal ecosystem

The differences between self-perception and perception of other actors already indicate that there is something like a desired ecosystem, in which some actors could play a more active or different role. As with the current ecosystem, these expectations can be differentiated in terms of the three groups of actors: European institutions, national governments and civil society.

4.1.1. European institutions

The general expectation towards both the European Commission and the Council of Europe is that they become more actively involved in the implementation of the EYWA. Although the interviewees acknowledge their decisive role in the creation of the agenda, most do not agree that responsibility for and co-ordination of the implementation of the agenda can be (fully) transferred to the Youth Partnership. According to the two institutions, they bear political responsibility of the implementation of the EYWA, giving the Youth Partnership a co-ordinating role, serving as a common space for information, research and mapping of developments in youth work and the EYWA (Council of Europe 2021; Council of the European Union 2024). This is in line with the expectations of the other members of the European Steering Group. However, ESG members expect both institutions to proactively engage other bodies and institutions that are part of or associated with them.

The comment of the two institutions in the validation process that they consider themselves very active shows that perhaps more work needs to be done here on the visibility of the institutions than on their current engagement. The distinction between the levels of co-ordination and execution could also be helpful here, as co-ordination is often less visible than execution.

The expectation to stay politically active by steering and implementing the agenda is stronger towards the European Union, which is seen as having more capacities in terms of networks as well as financial and human resources. Specifically, the youth unit of DG EAC is expected to involve other relevant DGs (namely DG REG and DG EMPL), other official bodies (namely the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee), but also the Europe Direct centres and the EU delegations to different countries.

Both institutions are expected to align their funding programmes in the youth field more directly and explicitly with the EYWA and its priorities. In this sense, the expectation is that the programme guides explicitly refer to the agenda, rather than referring to the youth work priorities of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030. Since then, the EYWA has become more prominent in the Erasmus+ Program Guide as well as the European Youth Foundation. Moreover, specific funding streams should be made available for projects directly supporting activities within the agenda; the European Commission is also expected to include a requirement for its operational grants for youth organisations to include in their work plans activities connected to the agenda. Similarly, some members of the ESG suggested that the national agencies for Erasmus+ and ESC programmes should be more actively involved in pushing processes on a national level. However, this again shows the discrepancy between the desire to align EU funding programmes more closely with the EYWA on the one hand, and the criticism that the national agencies play (too) dominant a role in the agenda on the other.

Both institutions are expected to influence their member states more to push for greater implementation of the EYWA on a national level. Again, the European Union is seen as the institution with more resources and potential to put pressure on national governments, using the mechanisms and instruments it has at hand. This perspective corresponds with findings from national processes, where national actors are, among others, suggesting European institutions putting more pressure on national governments to actively support the EYWA nationally (Hofmann-van de Poll 2023). However, there are also opposing opinions, as some of the interviewees point out that the agenda does not have a mandatory character and that the European institutions do not have the competences to force national governments to implement it.

The line of arbitration between these opposing views lies between representatives of the civil society, who wish for a stronger role of the European institutions, and representatives of the European institutions and national governments, who warn against expecting too much from the European institutions with reference to the non-binding nature of the agenda, as well as the limited youth policy competences of the two institutions. Thus, the question is raised to what extent such expectations are indeed realistic both to put into practice as well as to the extent that European institutions can be made responsible for the lack of structures and support on a national level.

4.1.2. National governments

There is an overall agreement that strengthening youth work development in the framework of the EYWA lies first and foremost in the hands of national, regional

and local authorities. Hence, the expectation is that national governments should take a stronger role in initiating processes supporting the thematic priority areas of the agenda, such as through involving the youth work community of practice and developing new programmes and funding streams that will enable national communities of practice to implement new activities aimed at implementing the agenda. More generally, national governments are expected to speak and do more about young people and youth work, thus taking an advocacy role within their countries.

Again, there seems to be a difference between co-ordination and steering on the one hand and execution on the other. On the one hand, it is a fact (also confirmed by the interviewees), that the national governments are relatively active in the co-ordination of national processes, for example by setting up a national working group (Hofmann-van de Poll 2023). On the other hand, a much more active attitude is expected from national governments when it comes to initiating and funding concrete projects within the framework of the EYWA.

At the European level, many members of the ESG also expect member states of the EU and the Council of Europe to become more visibly involved as well as national efforts becoming more visible at the European level. Neither the annually conducted survey by the European Service Centre for the Bonn Process nor the current Council of Europe review of Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work are seen as suitable methods. The former is voluntary, while the latter is a single measure. Some stakeholders argue for a regular reporting tool that would make progress in the member states visible at the European level, for example a European monitoring system with mandatory reporting, similar to the EU youth report.

4.1.3. Civil society

There is a strong request from the ESG for the youth work community of practitioners to take ownership of the implementation of the EYWA on the national and local level. When referring to civil society and the youth work community of practitioners, most interviewees refer to local youth organisations and youth workers. The perception is that at the moment, most of those actors are not involved and/or not even aware of the existence and the purpose of the EYWA. At the same time, it is acknowledged that most of what needs to be done nationally and locally has to be led by national and local communities of practice, with an outstanding role for practitioners, even though it is also pointed out that youth workers and organisations working on a local level are most often not involved in doing advocacy work. According to members of the ESG, youth organisations need to learn how to use the favourable political momentum existing on a European level and start applying the agenda as a lobby and advocacy instrument. This is particularly relevant for organisations that are mostly active locally and do not belong to the so-called European bubble, as well as those that work with marginalised young people.

To bridge this gap, national governments are asked to take a proactive role in informing, involving and supporting national and local civil society actors. As these organisations should not be expected to develop and implement additional activities without more funding, national governments are – similar to the European level – expected to develop new funding programmes and streams to support

projects related to the EYWA. In addition, the need for intermediary actors is often highlighted. There is a perceived need for actors translating and transferring the message of the EYWA to grassroots and local youth organisations, and youth workers. National youth workers associations are considered to be potential actors that could play such a role, bringing the policy documents and processes closer to the grassroots level. The Alliance of Youth Workers Associations (AYWA) could also play a role in steering such processes on the national level.

While a lot is expected from local organisations, not much was shared by interviewees regarding the involvement of international youth organisations. The role of those civil society actors was seen primarily in the ESG, following the overall process, supporting their national member organisations to get involved, and possibly implementing limited initiatives that are strongly related to the work of these organisations.

Other actors from the civil society are expected to get more involved in the future. Primarily, members of the ESG recommend to strengthen co-operation with universities and commission more youth work research on all levels.

4.2. Visualisation of the ideal ecosystem

If we try to visualise the expectations mentioned above (see Figure 2), we must not only look at the actors but also at the different levels. Starting from the European level, the two European institutions (the EU and the Council of Europe) in their co-operation in the Youth Partnership are expected to co-ordinate the various activities, measures and strategies, as well as clearly visible activities that can be assigned to the agenda and youth work development. At the same time, a certain pressure from the European institutions on national governments to actively implement the agenda is expected. Through funding and political support, the local level should also be supported by the European level. Conversely, it is expected that the national level can influence the European priorities of the EYWA through regular reporting and agenda setting.

Figure 2: Visualisation of ecosystem expectations

The national level is also expected to contribute to youth work development with visible activities. In addition, national governments and national co-ordinating groups have an important role to play in supporting the local level and informing this level about the EYWA. This expectation is also explicitly attributed to the national associations of youth workers to inform the local level, especially youth workers and local youth organisations, about the EYWA, to translate information and to support them in doing advocacy work. Universities and research institutes should take a greater role in providing evidence about youth work, its issues, development and structures, both European, national and local. Furthermore, they provide formal education for youth work, thus laying the ground for future quality youth work.

The local level, above all, is expected to take up the EYWA in their daily work and to carry out activities that are in line with the priorities, goals and themes of the agenda. In doing so, they should implement the information they receive from the other levels. It is recognised that financial and political support is essential for this to happen. Conversely, it is the local level that should promote national agenda setting through advocacy and lobbying, which in turn should be supported by the national level at the European level.

5. The European Youth Work Agenda: expectations, visions and challenges

The design of the European youth work ecosystem is largely determined by the EYWA. The agenda is both implicitly and explicitly the framework, or at least the reference point, within which European youth work development takes place. It is therefore not surprising that during the interviews, observations and validation process, the expectations, challenges and visions for the further development of European youth work were also discussed.

5.1. Expectations towards the European Youth Work Agenda

The lack of clarity over what the EYWA is, how it relates to the other existing documents and processes, and what is expected from it, heavily guide the expectations towards the agenda. First and foremost, it is expected that the nature of the Bonn Process and its relation to the agenda is to be cleared, even though it is not clear who should provide these explanations. More guidelines, directions and good examples are expected to be provided by the European-level actors – sometimes this being the two institutions in co-operation in the Youth Partnership, sometimes it being the ESG as representatives of the community of practice. A common vision is to be created of what the agenda is and should be in the future, so that concrete steps can be inferred from it.

In this regard, it is often mentioned that the agenda is a very broad and general document, including a wide array of priorities, and covering almost everything that is important for European youth work. What is missing though is a priority list, or a clearer path of what of all those priorities needs to be achieved, for example, in the next five years. Therefore, some of the interviewees argue for a (strategy) document with a more focused as well as mandatory character.

One of the most discussed questions as part of this study was about the roles of the different stakeholders in the implementation of the agenda. The general sentiment is that there has been no agreement about the roles and expectations from different sides on forehand, which is now causing problems of understanding. Hence, it is not clear who should steer the process of co-ordination and implementation, and who

should define priorities. There is a general understanding that the Youth Partnership has received the mandate to co-ordinate the communication and exchange of information in relation to the agenda between the two European institutions – the European Union, most notably through the European Commission, and the Council of Europe. However, more clarity is needed as to what that mandate means for the work of the Youth Partnership regarding agenda implementation, and how this relates to the roles of the two European institutions. There are requests for clearer definitions of the roles of the different actors, descriptions of what each of them is doing, and clear expectations of what they should be doing. The present mapping study is perceived as a first step in this process, a basis from which this question should be discussed and answered. The ESG could potentially help with drafting these definitions and descriptions, as its members perceive the ESG as the body that connects different initiatives and makes recommendations on how to make the agenda and youth work development more coherent.

There is, however, an overwhelming agreement that the EYWA needs to move to the national and local levels. National, regional and local stakeholders need to be more involved, from both the public sector and the civil society. However, there are different views of how that could be achieved. While for some it is the responsibility of European institutions to ensure that the agenda is implemented on a national level, for others it is the local and national stakeholders that should take a more active role and gain ownership of the process.

There are also diverse expectations as to how long it would take for the process to move to the national and local levels, and for visible results to be seen. Usually, the interviewees who think that the implementation should be pushed by the European institutions also expect that results should be visible sooner. Others generally expect that the process will take much longer and that it will be years, or even decades, before (local) youth workers, youth organisations and others in the community of practice gain ownership over the document and start using it actively to lobby for youth work development in their contexts.

5.2. Visions on the future of European youth work

Closely related to the expectations of the EYWA are the visions of how European youth work should (further) develop.

When reflecting on how European youth work has changed, many of the interviewees took 2001 as a reference point, when the white paper on youth was adopted by the European Commission (European Commission 2001) – even though there was a significant recognition of the fact that the Council of Europe has been active in the field of youth work for decades before. Usually, 2001 is taken as the year when more serious developments in youth work started happening. In this sense, the three youth work conventions are often mentioned as having an important impact, as well as the strategic documents of the EU and the Council of Europe, and the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work. Furthermore, the funding programmes of the two European institutions and the organisations linked to them, such as national agencies and SALTO resource centres, as well as the work of the Youth Partnership, all influenced European youth work. The EYWA is mentioned as

having a general impact on youth work development, in the context of the overall process of youth work development and as one of the documents that plays a major role in this context.

Compared to the time before the above-mentioned developments, youth work has changed and developed. In the view of the interviewees, youth work nowadays is much higher on the political agenda, it is more visible and valued, there is more funding available and there is much more European co-operation happening. Certain areas are outlined where changes are most visible, such as recognition, training and education for youth workers. Some of those developments are driven by intrinsic forces from within the (local) field, such as the wish for recognition, but in other cases the impetus comes from the European institutions, in a more top-down approach. The influence of the European funding programmes on youth work is often underlined as significant. Meanwhile, interviewees find it challenging to attribute any of the recent youth work developments to the EYWA. While they recognise that the developments fall within the priority areas of the agenda, it is difficult to identify a causal relationship between these developments and the existence of this particular document. It has been questioned whether these developments would have occurred anyway.

When speaking of how youth work has changed, most of the interviewees refer to recent global developments such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war on Ukraine and the high inflation rates. There is a unanimous agreement that all of these developments have posed and are still posing great challenges to youth work, and that the last few years have been particularly difficult for the field. Recognising that many youth organisations and youth workers have been badly affected, some of the interviewees call for increasing resources and a more strategic approach to build structures and services that will be more resilient and will not crash in the event of a new crisis.

But even if youth work is not in such a resilient condition yet, interviewees often noted that youth work has been successful in adapting to the new challenges, some stating that change is in the very essence of youth work, due to its close relation to social developments. Examples of how youth work is adapting recently include the strengthened focus on digital youth work, mental health and climate change. These three topics are the areas mentioned most often in relation to changing youth work, frequently accompanied by in-depth elaboration of their impact on young people and the wider society. At the same time, there is some criticism that while youth work is often changing its focus, it is not changing fast enough; changes are mostly thematic, rather than structural and related to the overall approach of youth work.

In a similar manner but with a more positive connotation, it is often mentioned that while youth work is constantly changing, its essence remains the same. The methods, means and priorities may change but the basis remains unchanged, and there is even an increased awareness of the need to go back to basic principles of youth work. By some, that is seen as a result of the increased spaces and opportunities for discussions, resulting in more people being motivated, and the community of practice becoming more united.

When it comes to the expectations for the future, the interviewees were optimistic but cautious. There is almost a common agreement that change in the youth work field is slow and that it will take a very long time for anything big to change. Hence,

some have questioned whether it is at all possible to assess the implementation of the agenda after two years, especially with the Covid-19 pandemic and a war in Europe happening in the meantime. Still, it is deemed important that the EYWA is used more as a political tool in the future and that the lobbying efforts intensify, particularly on a national level. The efforts should continue in the same direction as they do now but there should be a more strategic use of existing resources. The existing ecosystem is expected to be better organised and others to get involved as well - particularly those that are not aware of the EYWA. For that to happen, more outreach, information sharing and awareness raising is needed.

Provision of more resources is seen as an essential condition for further youth work development. At the same time, funding should not be directed to projects only but also to structural and operational costs of youth organisations. As a result, more stable and sustainable systems for youth work provision should be built. The European Union and the Council of Europe are expected to revise their funding programmes to contribute to that aim.

From youth work itself it is expected that it becomes more inclusive, reaching out to young people that are not so much involved today, such as from rural areas. Digital youth work is also expected to be further developed and integrated in youth work methodology. However, there is also recognition that the development needs for youth work are very diverse on local, national and European levels, both between countries and within. While those differences are to be taken into consideration, it is also important to keep a youth work core, not widening its understanding and use too much. Youth work would lose its essence if it would be either considered to be the answer to everything or expected to address every challenge.

5.3. Challenges

The development towards and the design of the agenda, together with the expectations attached to the agenda and the actors involved in it, lead to several challenges. These need to be addressed to avoid the impression that the agenda is stuck in a structural discussion. The challenges are both intrinsic and extrinsic, and need to be discussed both at the structural and the thematic level.

To start with the extrinsic challenges, two aspects are significant. First, the overall state of youth work organisations and working conditions of youth workers. There is a lack of financial and human resources in organisations, and where human resources are available, they are often underpaid. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the mental health of youth workers has also become an issue in youth work.

Second, this challenge is amplified by the crises that have plagued Europe since the agenda was launched: the Covid-19 pandemic, the war on Ukraine and the subsequent energy and economic crisis. In parallel, the consequences of climate change are also a factor that eclipses the agenda in terms of youth policy. Although the thematic priority area “Innovation and challenges” in the agenda has made room for discussing how youth work can deal with such challenges and test approaches to solutions, the extrinsic challenge is different. It means that although the importance of the agenda is recognised, at the same time youth policy priorities at the European level

as well as in the EU and Council of Europe member states are elsewhere. There is a danger that youth work will once again become a mere means to an end, whereas the agenda had just lifted it out of that and focused on youth work in its autonomy.

Beyond these extrinsic challenges, the EYWA also faces challenges that are home-grown or at least stem from the agenda itself. First of all, there are a lot of new and different terms, which are not clearly defined for everyone and are ambiguous in their use. This concerns above all the EYWA as a term itself, to which documents it refers to, the related question of what is meant by the Bonn Process, and what difference there is between an implementation of the EYWA and said Bonn Process. Can the agenda be “implemented” and how does it relate to the “putting into practice” which was mentioned in the EU Council resolution (Council of the EU 2020)? And then there is the concept of the community of practice, which according to its definition includes all stakeholders of youth work but at the same time is often equated with civil society or community of practitioners.

Second, the eight thematic priority areas in the EYWA are a challenge in the sense that they are formulated so broadly that essentially anything related to youth work can be seen as contributing to it. It is argued that this is one of the reasons why stakeholders are not inclined to come up with new and specific projects on the agenda, as their work already contributes to the priorities.

Related to this, the third challenge is the lack of understanding as to how the agenda should be implemented. Should the community of practice – and especially member states – initiate new programmes and activities, and should they report on these to the European institutions? This again raises the question of whether the agenda is something to be implemented or rather to be understood as a common understanding of priorities to work on.

This is also accompanied by a lack of involvement of national and local authorities, at least this is how it is perceived both in the ESG and during the observations. The role of the European level is mainly one of co-ordination and promotion, especially the initiation of projects in the jurisdiction of national, regional and local governments. It is a challenge to organise them more strongly, especially in the absence of European enforcement mechanisms.

At the European level, it is mainly structural challenges that stand in the way of the EYWA. These are firstly visible in the discursive differences between the EU and the Council of Europe. Related to this, it is mentioned that it is unclear who has the leadership. Who is leading the agenda implementation, who is in charge, and who should set the priorities and steer co-ordination? Is it the Youth Partnership, mandated by the Council of Europe and the European Commission, is it the ESG, composed of representatives of the community of practice, or is it ultimately the national governments, united in the CDEJ and partly in the Youth Working Party of the EU? Some of these questions are clarified in the policy documents of the Council of Europe and the European Union. Despite these questions being dealt with in the relevant policy documents, the perceived lack of clarity at the structural level hinders a common content-related co-ordination of the eight thematic priority areas. The associated lack of knowledge and awareness of what other actors are doing – especially, as it turned out in this study, the European Commission and related bodies versus the

Council of Europe and related bodies – and the need for a coherent approach can only be concluded to a limited extent with this study. The 2024 EU Council resolution on a youth work policy in an empowering Europe may resolve this ambiguity as it extends specific invitations to engage in the European youth work policy to not only to the member states and the European Commission, but also to the youth work community of practice and all actors involved in the European co-operation activities in the youth field.

Another challenge is the discontinuation of the European Service Centre for the Bonn Process after autumn 2023. Despite the ambiguity of its role in relation of the Youth Partnership, as expressed by some ESG members, the European Service Centre is recognised both by most members of the ESG, as well as by national communities of practice, as being a central pillar in supporting the development of national processes, especially in those countries without well-established youth work structures and/or own national agencies. The question arose as to who can take over this role once the European Service Centre is closed down. Since the centre was discontinued in October 2023, its activities and resources were incorporated in the SNAC “Growing Youth Work” (formerly the SNAC “European Youth Work Agenda”). Meanwhile, with the 2024 EU Council resolution on a youth work policy in an empowering Europe, the role of the Youth Partnership was further defined as “steering the Bonn Process forward” (Council of the European Union 2024), which may mitigate the challenge described herein.

Closely connected to this was the question of whether a 4th EYWC will be organised in 2025, and by whom. Here, too, an organisational and support structure was requested. In the meantime, it has been officially announced that the 4th European Youth Work Convention will be organised in Malta by the Agenzija Zghazagh, National Youth Agency of Malta, from 27 to 30 May 2025. Moreover, the EU Council resolution on a youth work policy in an empowering Europe invited the European Commission to structurally embed future youth work conventions in the EU youth programmes (Council of the European Union 2024), which may provide the support structures requested in the interviews with the ESG members.

6. Conclusions

As of 2023, three and a half years after the 3rd EYWC, the EYWA is an active element of European policy. For the first time ever, the actions of the EU and the Council of Europe are synchronised under one common policy document. Strategic processes, collaborations and events are happening on the European level, actively contributing to the agenda. The implementation of the agenda is also replicated on a national level in many European countries, both through the creation of national working groups and through the implementation of national, regional and local initiatives aimed at youth work development within the eight thematic priority areas. Other relevant stakeholders also become more involved, such as national associations of youth workers.

However, in the first half of 2023, when the interviews were conducted, the agenda was still very much seen as limited to high-level policy making, with only little anchorage in civil society and at the local level. This may be surprising, since at the 3rd EYWC the agenda was announced for the whole community of practice, which includes all levels (European, national, regional and local) as well as the different actors (European institutions, governments and civil society). Since then, a number of new policies and measures have been adopted by the European Commission, Council of Europe and other stakeholders, with the goal of bringing the agenda closer to the community of practice. These include the mid-term review of the Council of Europe recommendation on youth work (Council of Europe 2023), the EU Council resolution on a youth work policy in an empowering Europe (Council of the EU 2024), the EU Committee of the Regions report on the implementation of the Bonn Process on regional and local level (European Committee of the Regions 2024), and the establishment of the Alliance of Youth Workers Associations.

Originally designed as a mapping of European actors, their projects, interactions and thematic intersections, the present study focused mostly on actors and interactions, rather than projects and thematic intersections. At this stage of the EYWA, the results of the study show that this last point is a difficult – if not impossible – undertaking for several reasons.

First, it shows that there are different understandings between the European institutions and organisations which are perceived as central actors of the EYWA of what the agenda is and how it can be co-ordinated and implemented accordingly.

Second, it follows that some actors on the one hand find it difficult to assign their measures in the field of youth work to the single priority areas of the agenda, or tend to label their existing activities under the agenda, and on the other hand find it difficult

to integrate topics of the agenda independently into their work. Whether the use of labelling is a good or bad phenomenon was already put up for discussion in 2022:

The data show that both new projects and existing activities are attributed to the Bonn Process. The latter practice of “labelling” existing projects, or projects that were planned and would be carried out anyway, in the context of larger campaigns and processes, has had negative connotations in the past. Although it does not reduce the need for new and innovative projects, this practice does have its advantages. Especially against the background of recognition of youth work, it makes sense to make existing and already planned activities more visible and to contribute to the recognition of youth work and the actors active in the field. The Bonn Process as such can contribute to this – at the same time, such activities can also raise the profile of the Bonn Process. However, the danger of this approach lies in the possibility for the Bonn Process to become an empty signifier that encompasses all youth work/policy activities.” (Hofmann-van de Poll and Kovačić 2022).

Third, and related to this, it turned out that most actors had difficulties in assigning their projects and measures to a specific area of the agenda. Thematic overlaps could therefore hardly be identified. Since the interviews the situation seems to have improved as the agenda is now better integrated in the EU funding programmes on youth, and with the 2024 EU Council resolution calling for a more integrated approach on all levels. In 2024, there seems to be more clarity about the contents of the agenda, the role of the different stakeholders and how the activities of different actors relate to the agenda.

For the study, it can be concluded that the impression arises that at the European level the EYWA is mainly discussed in terms of a structural debate. While the interviews provided little data to identify thematic overlaps, considerable data was found that provided clues to the structure of the European level as well as the relationships and expectations of the actors among themselves. The significant differences between self-perceptions and perceptions of others that this study has revealed make progress towards a unified approach to strengthen European youth work development more difficult.

Future research could shed more light on the process of implementing the agenda. In particular, there are four questions that could be followed up upon.

1. What is the common ground, or what are the main elements of mutual understanding between different stakeholders in relation to the EYWA and youth work development in Europe?
2. What are the perceptions of other stakeholders, not represented in the ESG on the EYWA, such as national and local youth organisations and grassroots youth workers, regarding the EYWA?
3. Where are opportunities and spaces where different stakeholders can act to contribute to the agenda implementation?
4. How is the agenda implemented at the national, regional and local level and what are the different approaches that exist in different European countries?

To further research on youth work ecosystems, the authors have developed, based on the present study, a national mapping methodology (Atanasov and Hofmann-van de Poll 2024, forthcoming).

6.1. Recommendations

From the findings of the study, several recommendations for the European community of practice were drawn up in autumn 2023. Since then, the Council of Europe and the European Union, as parts of this community of practice, have had the chance to reflect on the findings and the recommendations and adapt policy accordingly. Informal discussions with the European Steering Group members in 2024 show that these developments are positively acknowledged. It was therefore decided by the authors to complement the recommendations from autumn 2023 accordingly.

1. To discuss the nature of the EYWA, reaching a common understanding of its purpose and how it is to be “put into practice”.

The study showed that while the EYWA was framed in the EU Council resolution, the perception of what it actually means differs between different stakeholders, particularly regarding the question of whether and how it should be implemented into practice. There are also different opinions on whether the agenda is supposed to produce new actions by stakeholders, or whether it should integrate all existing efforts and initiatives under one joint strategic direction. Having a common understanding of the line of action will help different stakeholders position themselves towards the agenda and adequately plan what they should do in the future in relation to strengthening and developing quality and innovation in, and recognition of youth work. It can be expected that the outcomes of the Council of Europe review of the recommendation on youth work (Council of Europe 2023) and the EU resolution on the EU Council resolution on a youth work policy in an empowering Europe (Council of the EU 2024) will add to reaching a common understanding.

2. To discuss a set of key priorities to work on, thus specifying the very broad eight thematic priority areas.

As the EYWA is very broad and includes virtually everything related to youth work development, a need was expressed to agree on the most important and urgent priorities. By creating a list of key priorities within a given timeframe, or within a particular context, the stakeholders will be able to decide where to focus their limited resources. Having key priorities will also help concretise what the agenda should practically achieve in the upcoming period. Reflection on the European Youth Work Agenda may be part of the 4th European Youth Work Convention in Malta in addition to national processes to be implemented.

3. To develop a communication plan (or plans, as different groups of stakeholders require different forms of communication) to promote the EYWA, including the outcomes of recommendations 1 and 2.

Since the adoption of the EYWA, there has not been much communication on how it should be used. Hence, knowledge about the agenda seems to be mostly concentrated in a rather small circle of organisations and institutions, and even among them, there is lack of clarity. Once the purpose of the agenda is better clarified and

more specific priorities are set, these should be communicated clearly and directly to different stakeholders: European institutions, national governments, NGOs, youth workers, etc. The communication activities should be adjusted to the needs and work realities of each stakeholder, and should also clearly state what is expected from them. The EU Council resolution on a youth work policy in an empowering Europe (Council of the EU 2024) is a big step in that direction.

4. To distinguish between the roles and mandates of different stakeholders.

As the roles and mandates of different stakeholders in relation to the EYWA have never been explicitly defined, many are still uncertain if and how they should be engaged in the agenda implementation. In some cases, especially at the European level, there is an overlap of roles and expectations between different stakeholders. On a national level, there is often confusion about who should initiate and lead the process of implementation. If roles are clarified, stakeholders will be able to properly plan their work in relation to the agenda, as well as clearly set their expectations from the others in the field. The establishment of the new SNAC “Growing Youth Work”, the Council resolution on a youth work policy in an empowering Europe (Council of the EU 2024) and the announcement of the 4th European Youth Work Convention 2025 in Malta may help in this regard.

5. To make more concrete efforts to bring the EYWA to the national, regional and local levels.

One of the major conclusions of the study is that knowledge about the EYWA is mostly concentrated on the European level, among a small group of institutions and organisations. The lack of awareness existing on a national, regional and local level prevents many stakeholders from being more actively engaged in activities that can contribute to the agenda implementation (see also Hofmann-van de Poll 2023; European Committee of the Regions 2024). Concrete measures are needed to inform and engage others, particularly those that work directly with young people and that are not networked on the European level.

6. To make more concrete efforts to bring the EYWA to different actors from civil society.

Currently, the EYWA is mostly known among professional associations of youth workers, in those countries where these exist. However, youth work organisations, youth centres, youth clubs, youth councils and other stakeholders from the civil society are much less aware of it, particularly if they work on a very local level and/or in marginalised communities. The agenda could be more impactful if information about it reaches also those that are outside the bubble made of civil society actors that are well connected on the European level and follow European youth work development. A new actor potentially contributing to this recommendation is the newly established Alliance of Youth Workers Associations.

7. To ensure the involvement of relevant organisations and institutional bodies having the potential to support the EYWA and youth work development in general, especially such organisations and institutional bodies that are not directly responsible for youth policy.

The study showed that at the moment, the activities that contribute to the agenda implementation are mostly managed by the youth units/bodies of the European institutions. The involvement of other units, directorates, institutions and bodies that are not directly, or only partly, responsible for youth/youth policy, would mean greater co-ordination between different sectors and greater potential for implementing more impactful measures that can contribute to the eight thematic areas of the agenda. The report of the European Committee of the Regions (2024) is a first and important step in this regard.

8. To ensure more funds, or the better use of existing funds, to support the EYWA and with it, the further development of youth work in Europe.

As currently the funding programmes of the two European institutions are only partly adjusted to the EYWA, their possibilities for supporting new projects related to the eight priority areas are limited and fall within the general support that is being provided to youth work. Specific calls and/or types of grants, as well as more funds, would increase the possibilities for civil society organisations to make a greater contribution to the agenda implementation. The increased reference to the European Youth Work Agenda in the 2024 programme guide of the Erasmus+ Programme is an important step in this direction.

9. To increase the visibility of the EU and the Council of Europe within the EYWA by distinguishing and highlighting their efforts at the co-ordination and steering level on the one hand and the efforts of their subordinate authorities at the executive level on the other.

The role of the two European institutions in relation to the EYWA was perceived as hardly visible at the time of the interviews, though the work of the institutions and other structures that are part of them was very much acknowledged. It is therefore important to make the significant contributions of the Council of Europe and the EU to the agenda implementation more visible, while at the same time clarifying and presenting more clearly the mandate of the two European institutions in the agenda implementation. This may also include highlighting the role of the Youth Partnership as an information and co-ordination hub and the role of the SNAC “Growing Youth Work” as a support structure.

The European Youth Work Agenda marks an important milestone in the further development of youth work in Europe. This study is a small contribution to this. It has shown that in the first two years after the EYWA, there was a lot of uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the implementation of the agenda and the role of individual actors. These results were discussed in several validation workshops. Since then, a lot has happened, particularly at European level on the part of the two partner institutions: the Council of Europe and the European Union. The aim should now be to build on these achievements at the next European Youth Work Convention in Malta in May 2025 in order to strengthen and further develop youth work in view of the many challenges it has to overcome, but also in view of the many opportunities it offers young people.

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About the authors

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A youth work practitioner turned researcher, Dragan is equally engaged in conducting research, designing and delivering non-formal education activities, developing policy documents, and monitoring and evaluating programmes in the field of youth work. His research work is mostly related to youth work policy and practice, youth work recognition, youth work education and training, volunteering and non-formal education. Dragan has been part of the national association of youth work providers in North Macedonia since its establishment in 2013, both as a board member and as its Secretary General. As one of the pioneers in youth work policy in the country, he co-authored the first vocational standard and training for youth workers, the National Quality Standards for Youth Work, National Youth Work Portfolio, and the Quality Standards for Youth Centres in North Macedonia. Dragan was one of the experts contracted by the Youth Partnership for research related to the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda.

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In recent years, the Council of Europe and the European Commission have decided to enhance their co-operation on youth work. Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on youth work, the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (2020) and the consequent European Union Resolution of the Council on the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA) in 2020 were key milestones in this direction. In line with these developments, in 2022-23, the EU-Council of Europe Partnership in the field of youth stepped up its activities on youth work and on the implementation of the EYWA, among others, by facilitating the dialogue within the youth work community of practice.

The EYWA is a strategic framework for strengthening and developing quality and innovation in, and recognising, youth work. Within this framework, a field of action has been established where a variety of European stakeholders, first and foremost the European Union and the Council of Europe, provide guidance through European policy documents and initiate activities and measures to further develop youth work structurally and in terms of content. At the European level, several institutions, organisations, agencies and individuals address the contents of the EYWA.

The aim of the “Mapping European youth work ecosystems” study is to depict the diversity of actors and their initiatives and to highlight thematic overlaps, on the one hand, and thematic gaps, on the other hand, by providing a systematic overview of actors in this field and contents. Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations for the European community of practice have been developed, including the need for further dialogue on the nature of the EYWA and the need to reach a common understanding of its purpose and priorities.

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