

InterCity Youth Conference – Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very glad to have the opportunity to speak here today and meet all of you. This conference brings together committed staff from municipalities all around Europe. It is a great occasion to learn from each other.

Here, we can discuss how exactly we can strengthen youth work at the local level, so that young people and our communities as a whole, become stronger, more inclusive and more resilient.

Today, I think in particular of the young Ukrainians who will need to help rebuild their communities after this war.

I believe that quality youth work, with the support of cities and regions both within and outside Ukraine, will help them face this challenge and contribute to strong, democratic societies.

As the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I would like to focus on an issue that is particularly important for the Congress: youth participation.

The Congress has advocated for youth participation for decades now.

Already in 1992, we adopted the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local Life.

Furthermore, on the first of June this year, we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the entry into force of the additional Protocol to the European charter on local self-government, on the right to participate in local public affairs.

We should not forget that this Protocol also concerns youth, because young people should have a say in our societies, in particular at the local level.

If we want to build democratic cities, towns and regions – if we want to be relevant – we have to listen to youth.

They deserve a say – a seat at the table – especially on issues that concern them directly, such as youth work.

This is why we developed a “rejuvenating politics” strategy and established a youth delegates scheme in the Congress.

I will come back to this later in my speech.

Before I speak more about participation, let me first say a few words on what the Congress is about. The Congress is an institution of the Council of Europe.

It monitors the state of play of local democracy according to the European Charter of Local Self-Government throughout its 46 members States.

It addresses how cities and regions can tackle society's mayor challenges, like gender equality, youth participation and sustainable development.

It is a forum bringing together mayors, city councillors and regional representatives.

They are our strength: our members have real experience on the ground, in our communities.

They have different perspectives, backgrounds, and convictions.

And they all contribute to our resolutions, in which we address the common challenges that cities, towns and regions across Europe face.

Now, I don't have to tell you that developing strong youth work is one of those common challenges.

After all, you have all travelled here today, from your municipalities, to talk about how we can do this.

This brings me to the activities of the Congress and of the Council of Europe on youth work.

Youth work is one of the priorities of the Council of Europe's youth sector which has developed an impressive set of tools and manuals, including its portfolio to help youth workers develop their competences.

At the Congress, we fully support these initiatives and highlight in particular the role of cities and municipalities in making them a reality.

Because, yes, youth work can go international.

During this conference, you will hear about a range of initiatives at European level.

But it has its roots at the local level.

Young people first become involved in their own city, town or even their own street.

We, as local politicians, often have to step in when there is a problem.

For example, when we see high rates of school dropouts, an increase in mental health problems, or when there is a rise in criminality.

Youth work can help us prevent these issues.

It has proven very useful in recent years on fighting radicalisation at the grassroots level.

I remember impressive examples we had the chance to see at first hand during one of our Summits of Mayors, in Rotterdam, how young people and the city officials worked together developing interreligious and intercultural dialogue, through concrete neighbourhood projects.

Local authorities can, through their policies and action, make or break quality youth work.

This is a responsibility, but equally an opportunity.

It is very important to point out that this is not charity.

It is not about kind politicians providing for helpless youth.

Youth work gives back much more to us than we put into it.

Indirectly, it allows young people to gain skills that can help them get better jobs, combatting unemployment.

It has shown to benefit mental health, lowering pressure on our healthcare systems, and can also help prevent criminality.

For example, in London, the Metropolitan Police directly invests in youth work, because they have realized that it helps reduce crime.

They even have youth workers in police stations to meet young people directly after their arrest and help them move away from crime.

Young people and youth workers are often amongst the first to help citizens in need.

For example, in Stockholm, the Changemakers Academy supported a project to support safe housing for LGBTI asylum seekers.

In Scotland, the Youth Leader Climate Change Project, gives free climate change training for youth workers.

All throughout Europe, we see youth organisations organising beach or forest clean ups.

During the pandemic, youth workers in Milan worked with the Red Cross to deliver food to people in quarantine and to vulnerable families.

In Ukraine, youth volunteering engagement is also seen as part of the humanitarian response to the war.

And throughout Europe, young volunteers have been dedicated to help displaced Ukrainians.

That is what youth work can do: it can have a real impact on our societies as a whole, even in the most stressful situations.

Yes, it is informal. Yes, it is often voluntary. But no, it cannot be an afterthought.

That is why, in February last year, the Congress adopted a report on youth work, and on how local and regional authorities can help strengthen it.

I want to thank the Chair of InterCity Youth, Jonas Agdur, who was our expert consultant, for his excellent contribution to this report.

In addition, in March this year, the Congress adopted a report on the future of rural youth, highlighting how youth work can empower rural young people.

As you all know, youth work is a broad and complex concept.

It comes in many shapes and sizes and does not fit into one single mould.

It has to be adapted to the local culture and context.

Therefore, there isn't one single recipe to build quality youth work policies.

Still, there are certain elements that are required to build quality youth work.

In our report, we give tools and guidelines for this that can be adapted to different contexts throughout Europe, no matter if they are a big city or a rural village.

Firstly, Local authorities need to invest in youth work, not just financially, but also by providing trainings for youth workers and spaces for youth work.

During the pandemic, a lot of towns and cities have invested in youth.

But others allocated funds away from the youth sector.

This is often because we don't have enough long-term vision on this issue.

We need to make sure that we have sustainable policies in place, so that youth workers can do their jobs without constantly having to worry and spend time searching for the next subsidy.

These policies should be evaluated against clear, measurable objectives.

Secondly, we ask that local politicians and administrations make information accessible.

Young people should know what is going on in their town so that they can take part in discussions and have their say.

And we need to make sure that we reach all young people, no matter what their background, gender or ethnicity is.

We have to make a special effort to reach out to young people who are usually excluded and might not know that there are opportunities for them.

This is especially true in rural areas, where access to information can be harder.

Lastly, we ask that our members listen to young people, and include their perspective in their policies.

Quality youth work should be designed, developed and delivered with, for and by young people.

Without their direct participation, we are not really talking about youth work, but in the best case about "work for youth".

Again, participation does not only benefit young people.

Their ideas and input are valuable and can help strengthen local youth policies.

Let me just illustrate:

Imagine that a city, with all the best will in the world, builds a youth centre without consulting young people.

There will be no guarantee that it will be somewhere that is accessible to young people, let alone on a location that young people would like to go to.

Without including young people in the design during the conception stage, they might build a centre that is not adapted to the activities that young people would like to carry out and have no guarantee that young people will embrace it or use it.

In other words, they risk not only wasting finances – which a lot of municipalities are short of – but they might also have wasted an opportunity to address real needs of young people.

This brings me to my main point: youth participation.

We often hear that young people are the future.

And that is correct, they are our future leaders, mayors and ministers.

Including them in our decision-making today, helps them build the skills and democratic values they will need later one.

But young people are also the present.

They might not have the right to vote in most countries, but that does not mean that we should not see them as full citizens.

They have a right to participate, to have their voice heard and make their own decisions on issues that will impact their life.

It is one of the core principles of both the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and of the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local Life.

It is something that we, at the Congress, fully stand behind.

However, for this to happen, we have to be clear about what participation is. Participation means engaging with young people on an equal basis.

Young people are not victims and politicians are not adults who know better than them and are doing them a favour by being willing to speak to them.

The Charter on the Participation of Young People offers concrete tools that can be used to strengthen youth participation.

I would encourage you to consider implementing it in your municipality when you go back home – if you are not already doing so.

In some member States, we see that youth participation is often considered as young people taking part in activities or events organised for them.

We hope that, by exchanging with peers, and via tools such as the Charter on Participation, we can spread the message that real participation means having a say in decision-making, not just taking part in an activity.

Now, what about the Congress itself? How do we ensure youth participation?

You might think “Great, another international institution that talks the talk, but do they also walk the walk?”

It would be hypocritical to ask of our members to include, really include, young people in their work, if we did not do so ourselves.

But, unfortunately, we often see leaders make promises that they do not keep or set standards for others that they, themselves, don't live up to.

And I can proudly say that – yes – at the Congress, we practice what we preach. As I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, the Congress selects a young person from each of our member states to be a youth delegate.

Since 2014, youth delegates take part in all of our Congress sessions and committee meetings.

They can take the floor and give their opinion on all our documents, just like our members.

We also work directly with the youth delegates when we develop texts or publications about youth. They actively contribute to our reports.

We have come to realise that including young people in our work, can have a real added value.

They can bring fresh ideas to debates, they strengthen our texts, and they bring in new perspectives.

By carrying out projects in their hometown or region, they also help spread the message of the Congress to a whole new audience.

Many members tell me that they have changed their minds about certain aspects of youth work because of their discussions with youth delegates.

Our youth delegates have recently contributed to a flyer about the Congress' youth work report, which I have with me today and which I invite you to take home and share with your local authorities.

To conclude: By giving young people a voice, we can build quality local youth work that will help not only our young citizens, but can also strengthen our towns, cities and regions as a whole.

It can further ensure the democracy and values we want to uphold.

At the Congress, we are committed to spreading this message and we hope that the tools we develop will help you do the same.

Thank you.