

**PERCEPTIONS  
OF YOUTH  
WORK  
IN THE  
WESTERN  
BALKANS**

**CHALLENGES  
AND OPPORTUNITIES**

# IMPRESSUM

**Title:** Perceptions of Youth Work in the Western Balkans:  
Challenges and Opportunities

**Authors and editors:**

Elvira Hadžibegović, Jelena Novičević,  
Anđelija Lučić, Adnan Pečković

**Publisher:** Forum MNE

**Address:** Bratstva i jedinstva 4, 81000  
Podgorica, Montenegro

**E-mail:** montenegro@forum-mne.com

**Website:** www.forum-mne.com

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.



# INTRO»»»»»»»» DUCTION

**“Youth work is a continuous process, not a series of individual activities. It’s not just one task or event that you complete and consider the work finished.”**

**(Research participant from North Macedonia)**

**Y**outh work has long been an integral part of the social fabric in the Western Balkans, yet its contributions and outcomes often go unrecognised, remaining largely under the radar. Despite the significant positive impact of youth work on both young people and society, youth work providers frequently face challenges in gaining political, formal, and social recognition across the region. The lack of acknowledgment of youth work as a valuable resource limits its full potential in fostering youth development and community cohesion.

In response to this, and in alignment with the EU Youth Strategy, the EU Youth Work Agenda, and the Bonn Process, a consortium of youth work NGOs from the Western Balkans and the EU has come together with a shared goal: to raise awareness and advance the recognition of youth work across the region. By highlighting youth work’s diverse and multilayered impact, this project aims to create an enabling environment for the further development and standardisation of quality youth work, ensuring that it is not only recognised and acknowledged but also nurtured to reach its full potential.

Earlier in 2024, a desk study on youth work policy frameworks was published as part of this project, serving as a key resource for understanding the current landscape of policy frameworks in the region. The study is now complemented by research conducted with youth work practitioners and communities of practice from across the Western Balkans Six, offering valuable insights into the needs and challenges faced by those working with and for youth – namely, youth work practitioners and providers.

More than simply providing a snapshot of the current state of youth work, this research, alongside the previously published desk study, aims to inspire action beyond the scope of the project. By fostering partnerships and offering actionable evidence-based recommendations, the project seeks to catalyse meaningful change and advance the shared mission of *Unlocking the Full Potential of Youth Work in the Western Balkans*.





**RESEARCH>>>>>**  
**METODOLOGY**

This research was conducted across the six Western Balkans countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It was implemented in two phases:

1. Online Questionnaire
2. Interviews with Relevant Stakeholders

The online questionnaire was developed and disseminated by consortium members throughout the youth sector across the participating countries. It consisted of 30 questions, covering a wide range of topics, including both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. As a quantitative research method, the questionnaire was designed to capture the views and attitudes of a large number of youth work practitioners, providing a broader understanding of the similarities and differences in the state of youth work across the regions involved in this study.

The second phase of the research involved focus groups with youth work communities of practice from each country, aimed at analysing their views and collecting inputs on issues pertinent to the research. The focus groups included youth work providers and practitioners, with the aim of identifying their needs and gathering recommendations for future action oriented at creating an enabling and supportive environment for the delivery of high-quality youth work activities.

This research not only highlights the trends, challenges, and opportunities in the field of youth work, as seen by youth work practitioners and communities of practice, but also offers actionable recommendations.

Both the online questionnaire and the focus groups topics are aligned with the priorities of the Bonn Process, an integral part of the Youth Work Agenda:

- › Develop and expand the youth work offer
- › Quality development
- › A common direction for the youth work community of practice
- › Beyond the youth work community of practice
- › Promotion and recognition
- › Innovation and emerging challenges
- › Policy frameworks
- › A strategic framework for youth work development

Timeline	July – December 2024
Methodology/Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online questionnaire</li> <li>• Focus group interviews with Youth Work communities and practitioners</li> </ul>
Sample	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 487 youth work practitioners and young people completed the online questionnaire</li> <li>• One focus group meeting per country with 72 youth work practitioners and representatives from organisations/institutions</li> </ul>

Table 1: Basic information overview on the methodology of the Research

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected through the online questionnaire and interviews was analysed to explore respondents' views and attitudes toward the state of youth work in the Western Balkans. The analysis focused on identifying variations in youth work practices across the countries involved in the research. These findings offered insights into areas that need improvement and suggested ways to achieve them.

The majority of the online questionnaire questions were multiple-choice, with some providing space for respondents to offer explanations where deemed relevant.

The second phase of the research served as the qualitative component. Its goal was to gather in-depth information from youth work providers/practitioners and communities through open-ended questions. This approach allowed respondents to elaborate on their views and experiences regarding the state of youth work in their respective countries. By using open-ended questions, the research captured richer responses, enabling a deeper understanding of the key issues.





To ensure a consistent understanding of the research findings, the key terminology used throughout this document is outlined below. For the purpose of this research, the following definitions have been adopted, without being restricted by national legislations.

## YOUTH WORK

Youth work is a broad term including a wide range of activities carried out with and for young people. It takes place in non-formal or informal educational settings, with the aim of promoting active participation and inclusion of young people in their communities, as well as in decision-making processes. Youth work offers opportunities for young people's development during their transition from childhood to adulthood.

## YOUTH WORK PRACTITIONERS

Youth work practitioners are qualified individuals (educated, experienced, and motivated) who work with young people using non-formal education methods, focusing on their personal and social development. Youth work practitioners include youth workers, youth leaders, and youth work specialists.

## YOUTH WORK PROVIDERS

For the purpose of this research, Youth Work Providers are defined as: youth workers and youth leaders; youth work organisations; youth work managers, project coordinators, and trainers; researchers and youth work training/education providers; youth organisations/organisations for youth; youth clubs/centres/services; and, in certain instances, institutions providing youth work programmes.

## YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

Youth organisations are associations led and run by young people. In contrast, organisations for youth may not necessarily be run by young people but conduct activities aimed at young people. To improve the readability of this research, the term “youth organisation” is generally used to refer to both types of organisations.

## YOUTH WORK PROGRAMMES

Youth work programmes are designed to promote the personal and social development of young people, addressing their rights and needs within a particular community (e.g., empowerment programmes, prevention initiatives). These programmes are delivered within a youth work setting.

## YOUNG PEOPLE

The definition of “youth” or “young people” varies across countries and institutions. In this study, the following age ranges are used for young people in the countries involved: Bosnia and Herzegovina (15-30), Montenegro (15-30), North Macedonia (15-29), Kosovo (15-24), Albania (15-29), and Serbia (15-30).

## YOUTH POLICY

Youth policy refers to an integrated support system for young people, based on the partnership of all relevant stakeholders, with the aim of establishing a coherent set of strategic measures to benefit young people.





**A**n online questionnaire was completed by 487 youth work practitioners from across the Western Balkan Six, with 60.4% of respondents identifying as female and 39.6% as male. Efforts were made to involve a balanced number of male and female respondents to ensure representation of both perspectives.

Concerning the education level of the respondents, the majority have attained some form of higher education. Specifically, 38.8% of respondents have completed Bachelor's studies, 31.2% have completed Master's studies, and 1.6% have completed PhD studies. The remaining respondents have completed either elementary school (4.1%) or high school (24.2%) only. All respondents involved in this study are engaged in some form of youth work provision. Based on their educational background, it can be concluded that the majority of youth work practitioners (71.6%) participating in this research are highly educated, which can be seen as a positive indicator for the recognition and development of youth work in the Western Balkans region.

With reference to the qualitative part of the research, the study included a total of 72 respondents from six countries in the Western Balkans, comprising 20 males (27.8%) and 52 females (72.2%). These respondents represented a diverse range of professional backgrounds and organisational affiliations.

In terms of occupation, the largest group consisted of 46 youth workers (63.9%), followed by 6 teachers (8.3%), 5 youth work practitioners (6.9%), 4 psychologists (5.6%), and 10 respondents (13.9%) who were categorised under "other" occupations. This diversity in professional roles reflects a broad spectrum of expertise and experience within the research.

Regarding organisational affiliation, the largest proportion of respondents, 24 (33.3%), represented youth organisations, while 21 respondents (29.2%) were affiliated with organisations for youth. Additionally, 9 of them (12.5%) were from youth clubs/youth centres, and 5 respondents (6.9%) were linked to institutions. A significant number of respondents, 13 (18.1%), took part in the research in their personal capacity, indicating the inclusion of independent voices alongside those from institutional backgrounds.



The background features a series of overlapping, semi-transparent teal shapes that create a sense of depth and movement, resembling a stylized landscape of hills or a series of steps. A thin, white vertical line runs down the left side of the page, starting from the top and extending past the bottom of the text.

# REGIONAL FINDINGS



## SETTINGS FOR YOUTH WORK

Youth work in the Western Balkans countries is, in most cases, carried out in youth centres or clubs, as evidenced by data provided below. It is important to approach the terminology with some caution, as terms such as youth centre and youth club (including their equivalents, such as: youth service) may vary across national contexts. In total, 67.8% of respondents indicated that youth work in their countries is delivered in youth centres. A significant proportion of youth work, specifically 56.5%, is implemented in youth clubs, according to the respondents' views. Given that this was a multiple-choice question (with no restriction on the number of responses), it can be concluded that youth clubs and centres serve as key hubs for youth work delivery across the region.

Interestingly, a large proportion (30.4%) of youth work in the region is carried out in school settings, which suggests strong collaboration between youth organisations, schools, and relevant authorities. Outreach youth work is implemented in 32% of cases, while detached youth work is conducted in 21.6% of cases. These responses demonstrate that youth work in the region is implemented across a range of settings, indicating the resourcefulness and creativity of youth work providers in the region.

A respondent from Serbia noted: "I would like to highlight the work of our mobile youth club, as I am emotionally connected to it due to its outreach work, particularly in Roma settlements and closed communities. I believe it is crucial to engage with these communities, implement programmes, assess the needs of the youth there, and determine how we can best support them."

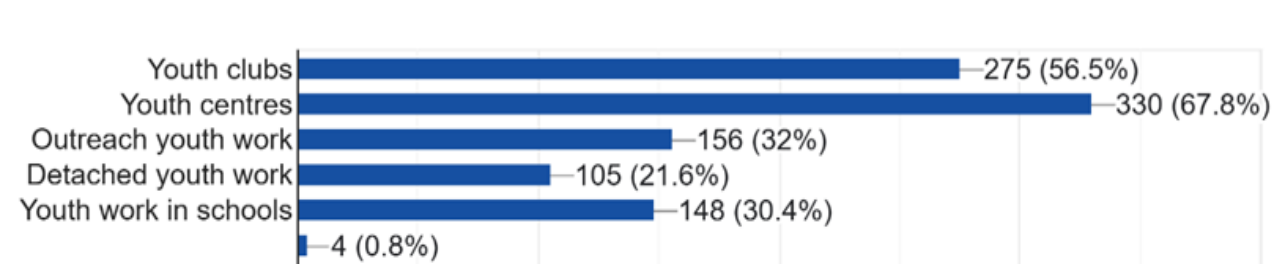


Chart: Settings in which youth work programmes are being delivered.

## SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK ACTIVITIES

One of the most important aspects of youth work and its activities is the provision of safe spaces where young people can fulfil their potential and develop in a creative manner. Such spaces, including youth clubs and youth centres, are crucial in fostering positive development. Youth organisations and youth work practitioners are often engaged in struggles to secure such spaces.

28.8% of respondents indicated that there are sufficient spaces where youth work can be practised, while 30.7% argued that while there are enough spaces, these locations are not suitable for all types of activities. Another 29.2% of respondents claimed that there are not enough spaces for youth in their communities, while 5.7% reported that no spaces for young people exist in their communities.

The availability of spaces for youth can depend on various factors, including the presence of youth organisations within the community, the political will of local authorities, funding, and other resources.

A respondent from North Macedonia highlighted: “It is important to establish yourself in the local environment for a longer period as a youth worker; that is very important. The second element is to have a specific location because youth work is carried out specifically there. It is important that it is emphasised as non-formal education, which is a valuable complement to formal education.”

A respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina noted: “I think it is important, regardless of its size, for each town to have at least one youth club or youth centre. And I think majority of the costs associated with these centres or clubs should be covered by the local municipality,” while another respondent from Albania stated: “It’s hard to find spaces where young people can gather and do activities, and even when there are places, they’re not designed for everyone, especially those with disabilities.”

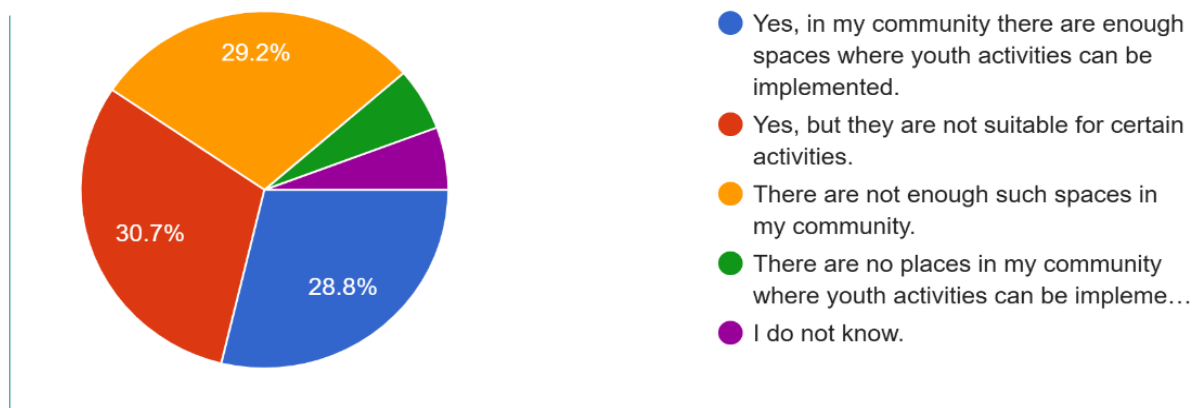


Chart: Spaces for youth work activities

## YOUTH WORK IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS

A respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina shared: “For me, as someone who comes from a rural environment and does not have a strong economic background, youth work activities provide the opportunity to visit important places, meet new people, and learn skills that are important for everyday life.”

Data indicates that a high percentage of youth work activities across the region are implemented in urban areas, suggesting that rural areas are often overlooked. Specifically, 83.4% of respondents stated that youth work is predominantly organised in urban areas, while only 3.7% of respondents believe that youth work activities are mainly carried out in rural areas. Additionally, 5.6% of respondents claimed that youth work is equally present in both urban and rural areas, while 7.2% of respondents were unsure.

A respondent from Albania stated: “The opportunities for young people in Tirana are numerous, compared to those in small towns or villages. When youth activities are held in small towns or villages, young people in these areas see them as a beacon of hope,” while another respondent from Kosovo noted: “For example, urban areas are more inclusive, meaning that youth living near the city are more involved in activities than those living in rural areas, such as villages. Perhaps it would be beneficial to include youth from villages as well, so we can work together for greater inclusivity.”

The fact that such a high proportion of youth work activities are concentrated in urban areas, and such a small percentage are implemented in rural areas, warrants additional consideration. The reasons for the lack of youth work in rural areas may be multiple, including but not limited to limitations in personnel, financial and organisational resources, outreach efforts, lack of infrastructure and the fact that rural areas are often depopulating as young people often move to bigger cities or even abroad. No conclusive answers are suggested though the research, and this issue should be explored further.

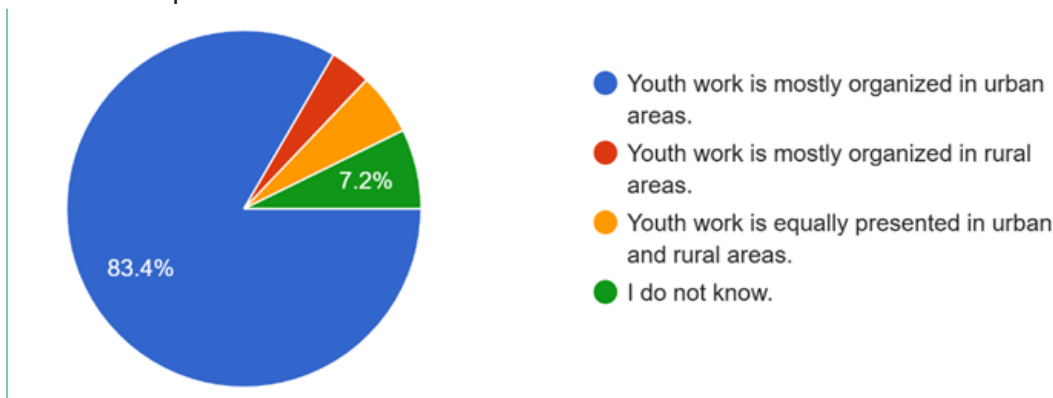


Chart: Provision of youth work in urban and rural areas



A respondent from Serbia stated: “I have worked with young people from different groups and areas, some from rural areas and some from Novi Sad. Socialisation meant a lot to them; they literally found friends in this group and had someone to socialise with, even outside of the workshops. I think that is very important.”

## CATEGORIES OF YOUTH ENGAGED IN YOUTH WORK ACTIVITIES

According to the data collected, 45.2% of respondents believe that youth work activities are primarily attended by mainstream youth. On the other hand, a similar percentage (43.4%) believes that all youth participate in youth work programmes. 20.1% of respondents stated that youth work activities are attended by young people with some form of disability. In terms of learning disabilities specifically, only 11% of respondents trust that young people with these types of disabilities engage in youth work activities.

Regarding young people from different ethnic backgrounds, 23.7% of respondents believe that youth work activities are attended by youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This can potentially be attributed to the ethnically homogeneous nature of some areas where youth work activities take place, although there is insufficient empirical evidence to confirm this assertion.

The Western Balkans region is ethnically diverse and has a turbulent past, which makes one of the key missions of youth work in the area to promote peacebuilding and foster regional cooperation among young people. Focus groups revealed the following insights:

“Youth work in a society like the Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, which is divided along many lines, manages to bring people together. We are in Brčko District, where we had „two municipalities within one municipality“. In 1999, our organisation’s task was to bring people of different ethnic backgrounds together, as that was crucial at the time. Over the years, we have achieved quite a lot, and today they are very good friends. We continue to hear from each other to this day, and if it hadn’t been for the organisation at that moment, in that place, I don’t know if we would have had this process or results. Reconciliation and trust were built over the years thanks to youth workers’ efforts.”

On the other hand, similar issues persist even today across the region, as a respondent from Kosovo noted: “Speaking from the perspective of my (Roma) community, one challenge we face in Prizren is inclusivity. There are youth centres that belong exclusively to one community, such as the Bosnian community. When the youth centre in Ortakoll is divided into another centre for a specific community, it reflects a lack of diversity.”

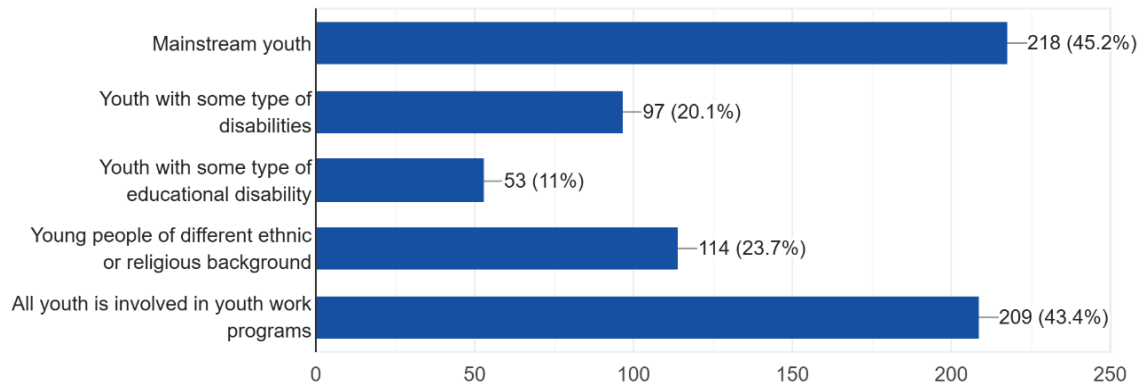


Chart: Categories of youth involved in youth work programmes

## ADDRESSING YOUNG PEOPLE'S NEEDS THROUGH YOUTH WORK PROGRAMMES

One of the fundamental principles of youth work is to respond to the needs of young people, which means working with young people and for young people. In this regard, timely communication with young people about their needs and how they perceive youth work programmes is vital.

Research shows that 28.6% of respondents believe that youth work programmes are tailored to the needs of young people and respond to their needs. The largest percentage of respondents (48.3%) indicated that youth organisations implement activities based on available funding, yet this does not necessarily mean that these activities are not need-based. Rather, priorities are often set by donors, and youth work providers may struggle to address ad-hoc needs on the grassroots level due to the lack of flexible funding opportunities.

A portion of respondents (14.5%) claim that youth organisations do not understand what the needs of young people are, and 4.4% believe that youth organisations fail to represent the needs of young people. The remaining respondents (4.1%) are unsure whether youth organisations represent the needs of young people.

From the responses, it can be inferred that funding opportunities have a significant impact on youth work provision, with needs assessments often following rather than leading the planning process. However, this cannot be a definitive conclusion, as there are funding priorities set by donors that are indeed need-based. More effort should be made to communicate the needs of

young people and ensure the availability of flexible funding opportunities that can provide effective solutions to those needs.

According to one respondent from Albania, “Needs assessments are regularly conducted through consultations with student governments, direct discussions with school principals and teachers, and various surveys and conferences. These methods ensure a comprehensive understanding of youth needs, although a lack of dedicated budgets from local authorities often necessitates collaboration with NGOs to implement these programs effectively.”

In Montenegro, a respondent noted: “We conduct research, ask young people and other groups, and hold focus groups and monthly interviews where we listen to each other. The practice so far has been that young people themselves are the creators of ideas, programmes, and even programme names. This is how we involve them.”

A respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina shared: “Maybe a little as I see youth work today, where it is more and more reduced to individual organisations and individual projects in those organisations that last six months, a year, two, three years, and this is 90% of youth work, while systemic solutions for working with young people, such as youth centres and municipal budgets, are becoming less and less frequent.”

Finally, a respondent from Kosovo emphasised the importance of continuity in youth work: “If we only work on one project, we organise it and run activities, but once the project ends, so does the work. Continuity is crucial for long-term impact.”

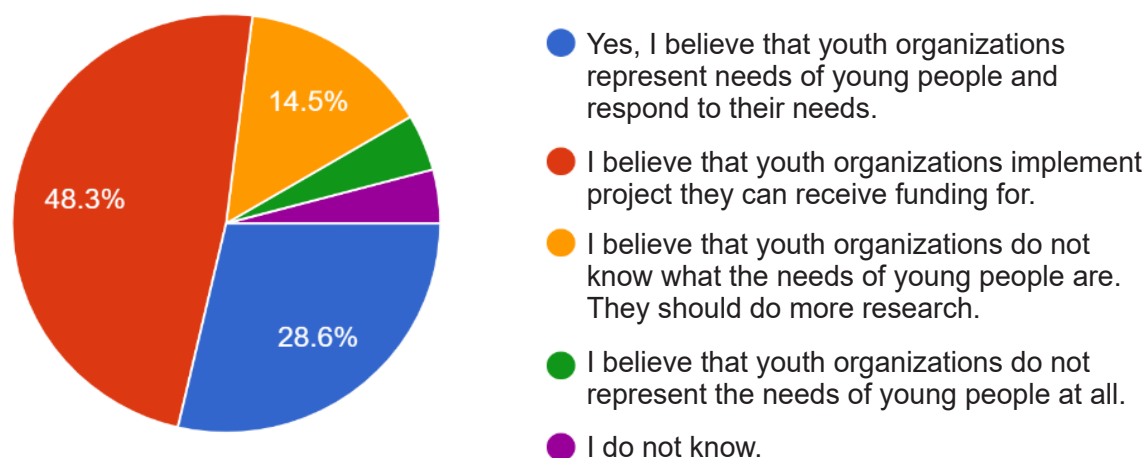


Chart: Young people's needs and youth work programmes



## YOUTH WORK PRACTITIONERS

Recognition of youth work as a profession is closely linked to the recognition of youth work practitioners as professionals. As highlighted earlier, in various national contexts, youth work practitioners (such as youth workers and youth activists/leaders) are (to be) recognised at different levels, whether in terms of education, professional standardisation, or job classification.

However, the issue at hand is not only about how the wider public perceives youth work or youth work practitioners, but also how youth work practitioners themselves define the role of someone who practices youth work.

The majority of respondents (59.3%) would classify individuals who practice youth work as “youth workers”, while 18.7% would define them as “activists working with young people”. For the sake of data interpretation, it is important to note that although the term “activist” would not naturally imply a professional role, in countries such as Montenegro, the term “youth activist” is officially defined by national legislation. In these contexts, individuals who undergo specific training and pass an exam are awarded a “youth activist” diploma. The results should, therefore, be interpreted with this distinction in mind.

A further 9.2% of respondents define a person who practices youth work as a “volunteer working with young people.” While the term “volunteer” does not necessarily imply a professional role, some respondents may have used this terminology due to a lack of formal education in youth work, despite having years of practical experience. Alternatively, it may reflect the fact that they hold “volunteer contracts”, which are often used for junior professionals in contexts such as traineeships and professional development.

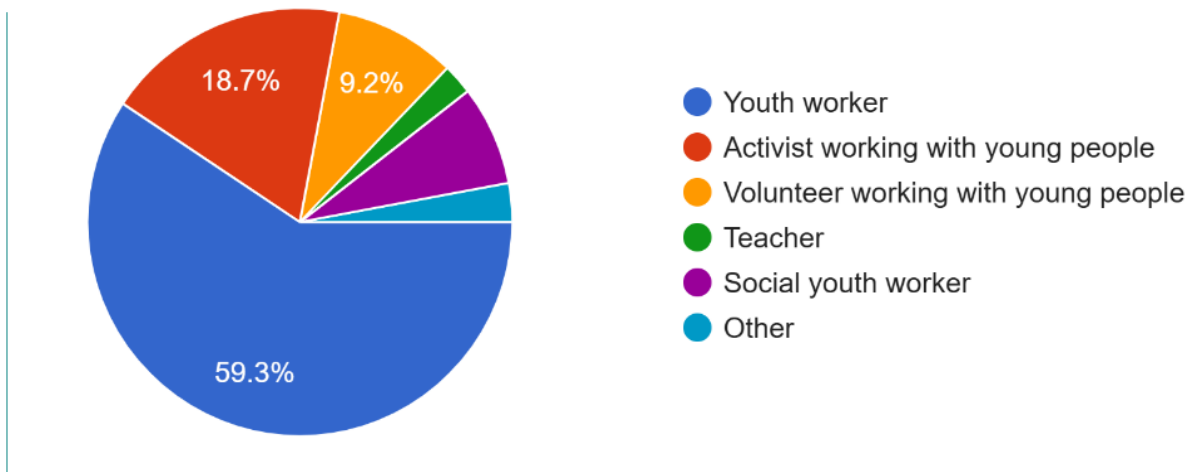


Chart: Naming youth work practitioners

7.5% of respondents consider someone who practices youth work to be a “social worker”, while 2.3% define them as “teachers”.

From these responses, it can be concluded that a significant number of youth work practitioners do not share a common understanding of who a youth worker is or what the role entails. This often relates more to self-identification than to an official title.

As one respondent from Kosovo noted: “Those of us who work with youth, it’s difficult to explain to someone the added value and satisfaction you get from the work we do as youth workers... This is undeniable. I think it’s an undeniable part of how much it develops you, how fulfilling it is, and how much it helps you in the work you do. Even if you do it voluntarily, it is inseparable that it will also affect your performance in your job afterward... And the state does not recognise this as work, or as the added value that we see.”

## RECOGNITION OF YOUTH WORK PROFESSION

The recognition of the youth worker profession has been emphasised both in the qualitative and quantitative components of the research, whether in formal, political, or social contexts.

The recognition of youth work as a profession would undoubtedly improve the understanding of its value among the wider public. It would also allow communities to better understand the importance of youth work and the benefits it brings. Such recognition could even facilitate various aspects of youth work provision, including the use of spaces, access to quality programmes, funding opportunities, and job security, among others.

Data indicates that 29.4% believe that youth work is not recognised as a profession in their countries, while 24.8% believe the opposite. Additionally, 23.6% of respondents indicated that youth work is in the process of gaining recognition in their country, while 22.1% were unsure whether youth work is recognised as a profession in their countries.

A respondent from Serbia remarked: “What is currently happening is that we have a job standard that is in the process of being adopted, so we should, I hope, have the job standard adopted by the end of the year. This document will outline the jobs performed by a youth worker, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for someone who wants to pursue this career, and the areas where youth workers are most commonly engaged. However, even with the job standard in place, formal recognition will still be necessary. We currently have a job code in the job classification, but we do not have a qualification standard. What is also crucial is that we do not have a training process through which one can acquire the necessary qualifications.”

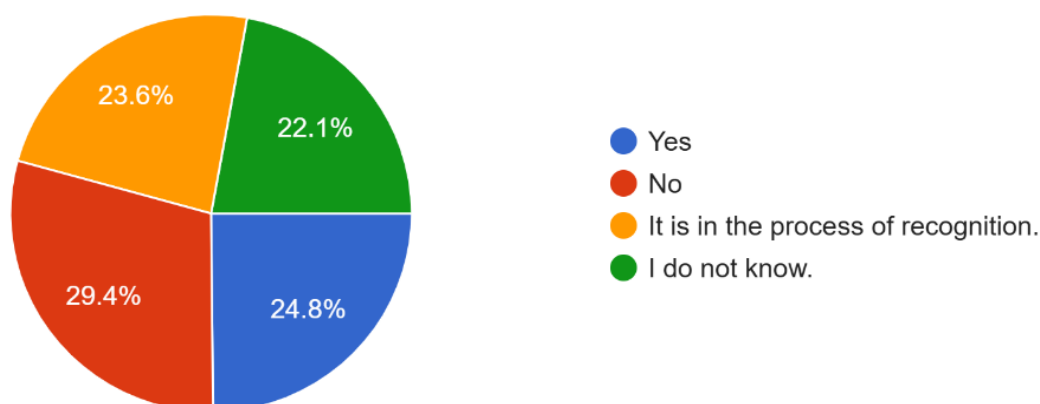


Chart: Recognition of youth work profession

## TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH WORK PRACTITIONERS

Training and education for youth workers and other youth work practitioners is a vital aspect of becoming a competent youth work practitioner. While some advocate for the education of youth workers to be formalised at higher education institutions and universities, in many parts of the Western Balkans, ad hoc training programmes are being provided for youth workers and other practitioners, typically developed and conducted by youth work associations and organisations.

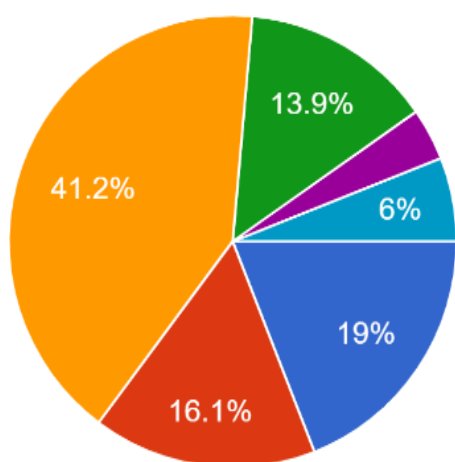
A key issue in this regard appears to be the funding for youth workers' training. According to 41.2% of respondents, education for youth workers/practitioners is only available when funding is secured, which, of course, impacts the overall quality of youth work in the region. On the other hand, 19% of respondents stated that learning opportunities are regularly organised by youth organisations. This suggests that different organisations offer education for youth workers in various ways, with some providing more frequent and regular training opportunities than others, which could be explained by the (non)availability of resources. Furthermore, 16.1% of respondents noted that educational activities are organised only when interest is expressed. 13.9% of respondents claimed that trainings for youth workers are rarely organised, and 3.7% of them stated that there are no training opportunities.

It is important to note that in some countries in the region, there are training programmes for not only youth workers but also youth activists/leaders. Standardisation of educational programmes, professional recognition, and the development of the youth work profession are issues subject to national processes, and each country in the region has further progress to make in these areas.



As a respondent from North Macedonia shared: “I think that the first year during the certification period helped me to systematise the knowledge that I have gained from it and other courses I took, so that I can work with children and young people.”

Another respondent from North Macedonia noted: “I would like to expand my knowledge on youth work, maybe through a higher level of education, maybe a master’s degree in order to say that I am a youth worker... I have practically challenged myself through attending and organising classes and activities for youth. I learned a lot of things about youth work during the certification process.”



- Yes, trainings for youth workers are regularly organized by youth organizations.
- Trainings for youth workers are only organized when youth workers express the need for certain training.
- Trainings for youth workers are organized only when organizations have funds for it.
- Trainings for youth workers are rarely organized.
- There are no learning opportunities for youth workers in my country.
- I do not know.

Chart: Training/Learning opportunities for youth workers and youth work providers

## YOUTH WORK TRAINING PROVIDERS

Youth work, although a long-standing practice in the region, is still a relatively young profession, or a profession to be, in the Western Balkans and is not yet widely recognised in most parts of the region.

According to the responses, 61.8% of respondents stated that youth organisations are the primary providers of education for youth work practitioners, offering training sessions, seminars, and other similar activities. Additionally, 13.2% of respondents reported that youth work education is also provided by accredited universities, both domestic and international.

However, 11.9% of respondents indicated that there is no organised youth work education available in their country, and another 13.2% were unaware of any such educational opportunities.

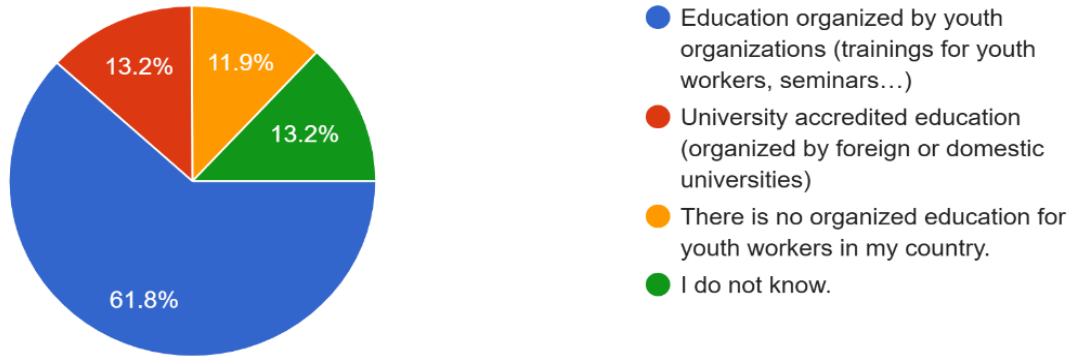


Chart: Training for youth work practitioners

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH WORK PRACTITIONERS

Youth work practitioners require continuous learning and development. As contexts, young people, and socio-political situations evolve under various influences, the need for youth work practitioners to adapt and adjust their methodologies becomes imperative. Youth work practitioners must remain responsive to the environments in which they operate, continually adapting to meet the needs of the young people they work with and for. This adaptation is crucial for ensuring that their work positively impacts the lives of young people and the communities in which youth organisations are active.

However, funding remains a significant challenge when it comes to the education and provision of learning activities for youth work practitioners. According to 50.7% of respondents, youth organisations organise training and seminars only when there is sufficient funding available. In contrast, 23.4% of respondents note that youth organisations organise training and seminars as soon as the need arises.

Additionally, 13.4% of respondents claim that youth organisations leave the responsibility for learning and development to the youth workers themselves, while 2.1% believe that youth organisations do not prioritise the learning of youth workers at all.

A respondent from Serbia shared the following reflection: “The other day, I was returning from Zagreb by BlaBlaCar with three young people aged between 21 and 23, and I realised that as a youth worker, I have no idea what kind of programme I could offer them that would be mean-

ingful or relevant to their reality. These were cars of a value I will never attain, a lifestyle I will never lead, and I don't truly understand that way of life. But that's not the point; it's not just about wealth accessible to only a few young people. It's about an approach to a consumerist world, quick earnings and rapid spending, superficiality, and so on – values that a significant number of young people live by. What's more, it is becoming attractive to those who don't live that way either. I believe youth work is not yet prepared or equipped with the necessary tools, thinking, or skills to respond to this shift. We lack the ability to offer an alternative, something engaging and appealing that could challenge these prevailing trends. How can we, using capitalist language, be competitive in a market where, on one side, all these things are being offered? I mean, this really left a strong impression on me. It has been on my mind for a while, and this experience with these young people only confirmed it. I'm not sure what the answer is. I think we need to act now, but also step outside those frameworks. Even when we think we've stepped out of the box, we may not have really done so. That's my impression."

From the responses shared, it is clear that youth organisations address this issue in three distinct ways:

- › Organising training and seminars when funding is available
- › Organising training and seminars as soon as the need arises
- › Leaving the responsibility for learning and development to the youth workers themselves

These varied approaches highlight the ongoing challenge of securing consistent resources for the professional development of youth workers, which is essential for their effectiveness in an ever-changing context.

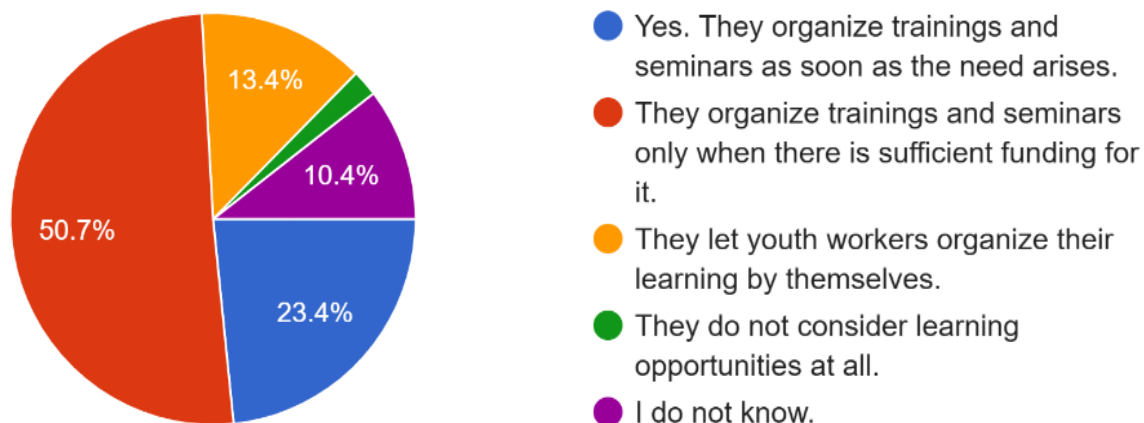


Chart: Youth organisations providing enough learning opportunities for youth workers



## SHARING BEST PRACTICES AMONG YOUTH WORK PROVIDERS

Sharing examples of good practice among youth organisations/providers and youth work practitioners is an important step in developing and delivering quality youth work programmes. Exchanging ideas, positive youth work models, and methods can be invaluable for youth work practitioners in their efforts to gain new competences and advance organisational capacities.

According to the data, 32.6% of respondents believe that examples of good practice are frequently shared among youth work practitioners, while 31.8% state that they are shared only when necessary. A further 22.6% report that examples of good practice are shared rarely, and 2.7% argue that they are never shared. Additionally, 10.3% of respondents are unsure whether good practice examples are shared at all.

These responses suggest that examples of good practice are not shared regularly among youth work practitioners and providers, indicating room for improvement in terms of expanding cooperation. Greater collaboration could help increase the impact on improving the lives of young people in the regions where these organisations operate.

A respondent from Kosovo shared: “We have a group of civil society organisations, a rather large group of about 20 organisations. We meet, exchange regularly and we have a good relationship with each other. When we’re together, we have great ideas and creativity to make changes.”

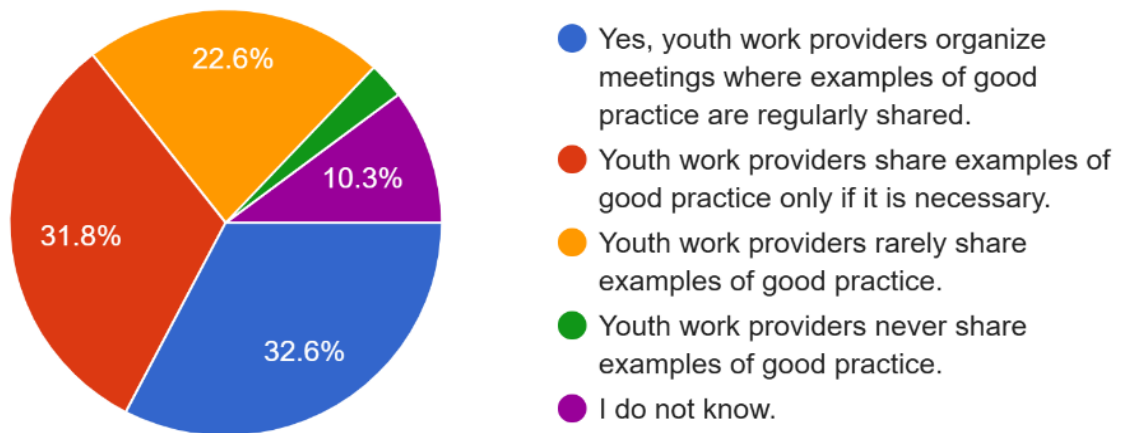


Chart: Sharing the best practice examples between youth work providers

## OFFICIAL REPRESENTATION OF YOUTH WORK PROVIDERS/PRACTITIONERS

Official bodies representing youth work practitioners in the region are primarily identified in the Laws on Youth in each of these countries. In most cases, these structures take the form of youth councils or various governmental or non-governmental associations focused on youth issues, including national associations of youth work practitioners.

According to 50.9% of respondents, there are official bodies representing youth work providers in their countries, while 31.9% believe that such bodies do not exist. This discrepancy could be attributed to a lack of awareness about these bodies, their potential non-functioning, or their non-establishment despite being recognised by law.

Furthermore, considering that 17.2% of respondents state that no official bodies represent youth work practitioners, this raises concerns regarding the institutional support for youth work in the region.

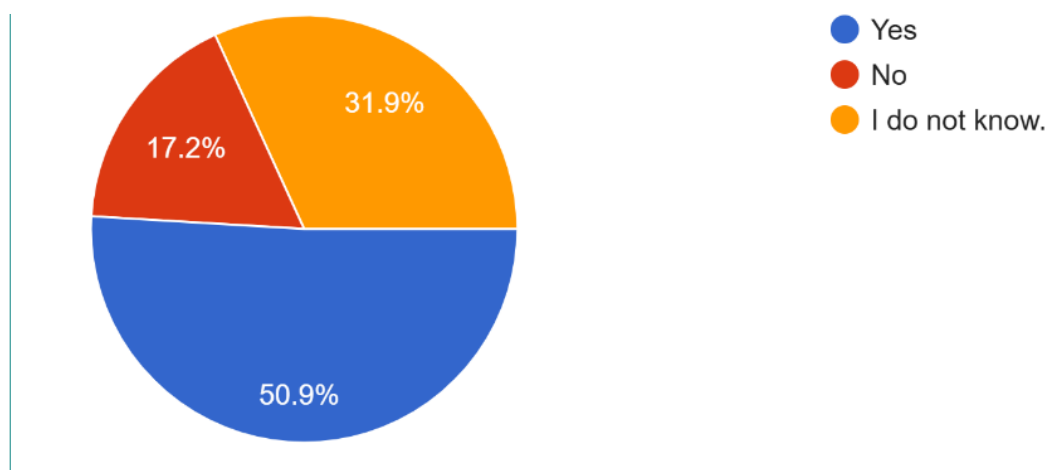


Chart: Official representation of youth work providers

## SOCIAL RECOGNITION OF YOUTH WORK

This section focuses on the recognition of youth work and youth work providers, specifically in relation to their contribution to the well-being of the communities in which they operate.

As one respondent from Serbia shared, “Considering that our association primarily deals with street youth work, or outreach youth work, what we recognise as a benefit for the community is that the services of institutions and other organizations, which may not be very visible—especially

in marginalized communities—become visible precisely because we conduct this type of youth work in them.”

The majority of respondents (38.8%) believe that only those who practice youth work truly recognise its contribution to the well-being of communities and the young people within them. In contrast, 10.4% of respondents feel that the broader community is aware of the benefits that youth work brings.

Additionally, 23.2% of respondents reported that only some members of the community are aware of the benefits of youth work, while 12.9% believe that the wider public is unfamiliar with these benefits. A concerning perspective on how youth work is perceived in some parts of the community is evidenced by 7.1% of respondents, who indicated that youth work is seen by some as “just playing with the kids.” Furthermore, 7.5% of respondents are uncertain about the public perception of youth work and its benefits within their communities.

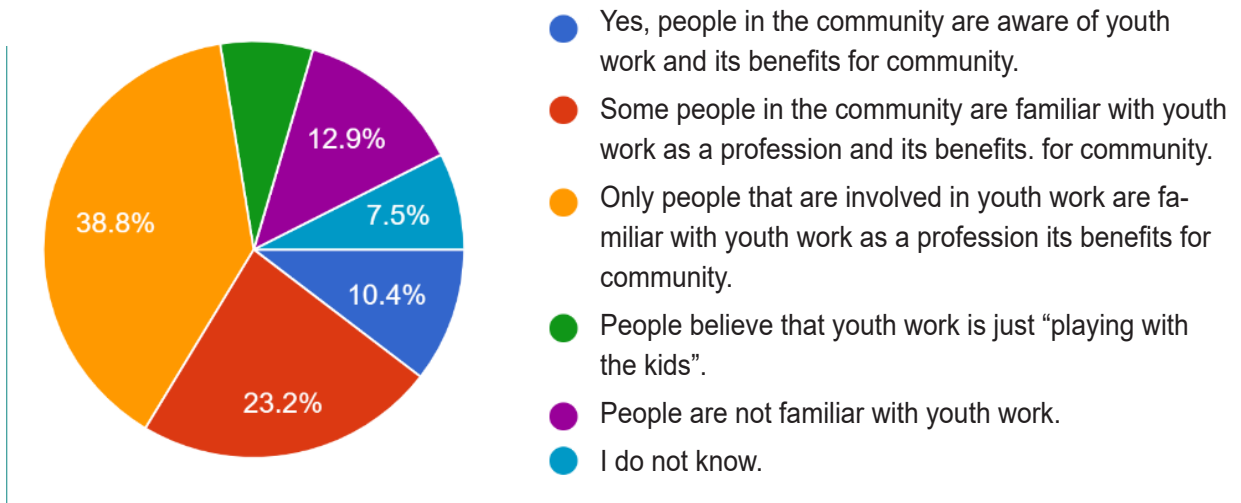


Chart: Social recognition of youth work

## SELF-RECOGNITION AND MOTIVATION

40.8% of respondents believe that youth worker practitioners are motivated by a desire to contribute to the well-being of both young people and the community as a whole. A further 30.6% trust that youth worker practitioners feel that only some of the activities they implement contribute to the community’s well-being, while others do not. 16% of respondents believe that youth work needs to undergo changes to contribute more effectively to the community’s well-being. Conversely, 4% of respondents assert that there are youth work practitioners who do not believe that youth work contributes to the community’s well-being. 8.5% of respondents are unsure of the youth workers’ beliefs regarding their contribution to the community.



The question of motivation for engaging in youth work remains prominent for those practising it. As previously mentioned, there are challenges such as the struggle for recognition by authorities, the community, and the difficulty in securing funding for activities. Youth work is often perceived as a constant struggle, and the question “Why do we do it?” is frequently asked.

As one respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina noted: “I think it is somewhat narrowly understood by people because everyone experiences it in their own way. But it is a very broad field; there is no area of life that young people are interested in where youth work cannot fit in. This means absolutely everything, from humanitarian work, environmental actions, raising awareness, and human rights to even going into space. Everything is important for young people, regardless of age—whether it’s up to 30-35 years or perhaps even beyond in the future. That’s how it should be observed and treated.”

A respondent from Serbia further elaborated on the impact of youth work: “The improvement of human rights, I think, happens as a result of involving young people from different groups and giving them the opportunity to get involved through youth work activities. In communities, this inevitably leads to working on respecting and realising human rights and, more generally, recognising the values that arise from that.”

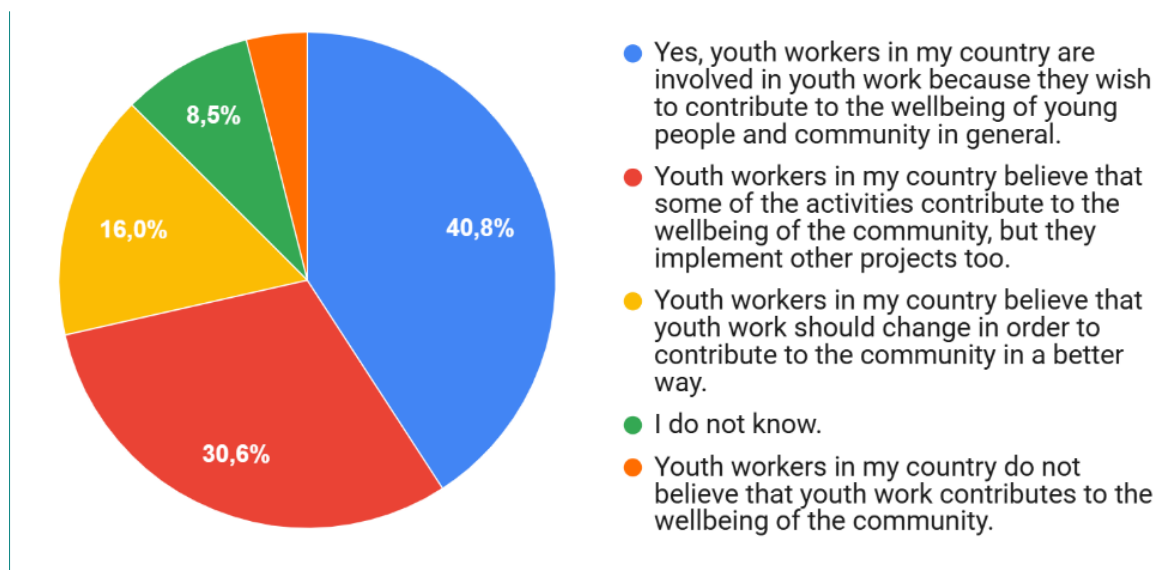


Chart: Youth Workers' Self Recognition

## LAWS' AND REGULATIONS' IMPACT ON YOUTH WORK DEVELOPMENT

As previously mentioned, Laws on Youth, Strategies for Young People, Action Plans, and similar documents aim to improve the work, position, and status of young people and youth work practitioners.

Monitoring and evaluation, as integral parts of the policy development cycle, are crucial. In particular, they are essential for continually assessing the effectiveness of these policies among youth organisations/providers and young people. This allows for an understanding of what has contributed to the intended changes and what areas need further improvement or revision.

55.7% of respondents stated that only some of the laws and regulations concerning young people and youth work practitioners have contributed to the development of youth work, while 15% argued that these laws and regulations have not led to any significant changes or advancements in youth work.

Furthermore, 17.4% of respondents claimed that these regulations have contributed to the recognition, promotion, and understanding of youth work, thereby helping to establish it as a profession. From this, it can be concluded that, even where current legislation exists, there is still a need for improvement.

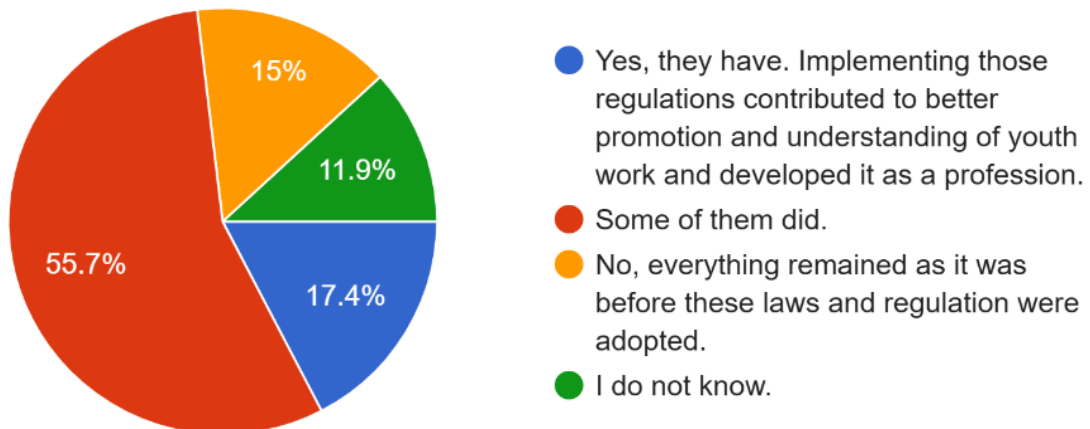


Chart: Contribution of laws and regulations to the development of youth work

## POLICY FRAMEWORKS IN SUPPORT OF YOUTH WORK PROVISION

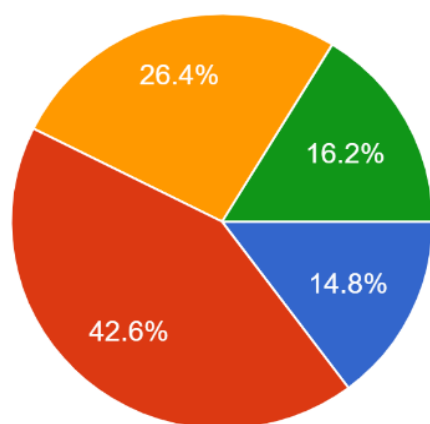
The purpose of youth policies is to create the necessary space and conditions for the development and delivery of quality youth work, enabling young people to engage in various socio-political processes, to be recognised and empowered as agents of change, and to contribute to their personal and professional development.

Youth policies should reflect a government's commitment and effort to ensure favourable living conditions for young people, while also creating opportunities for youth work practitioners to make meaningful contributions in delivering youth policy priorities through their work.

According to respondents, 42.6% believe that current policies are enabling for youth work provision in the Western Balkans, although they note that there are areas which should be incorporated into these policies, but are currently overlooked. On the other hand, 26.4% of respondents claim that the existing policies do not adequately address the needs of youth work providers.

14.8% of respondents believe that the current policies fully provide more than enough space to meet the needs of youth work providers, while 16.2% are unsure.

A respondent from Montenegro noted: "In Montenegro, youth work is mostly implemented by the civil sector. The civil sector is responsible for creating and delivering non-formal education and youth work programmes, with the exception of certain youth clubs, for instance, specifically in Budva. In most cases, it is the civil sector that takes the lead."



- Yes, I believe that current policy framework provides more than enough opportunity for youth practitioners and youth organizations to develop.
- Yes, but I think that some areas that could be incorporated into policies are currently overlooked.
- No, I believe that current policy framework do not encapsulate the needs of youth work practitioners.
- I do not know.

Chart: Enabling policy frameworks for youth work provision



## INFORMATION ABOUT AND FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH WORK

Funding opportunities and access to information about these opportunities have been frequently highlighted throughout both the quantitative and qualitative components of the research.

The data indicates that 31.4% of respondents believe that there are many sources of information on funding opportunities for youth organisations, but they would like to see more. Meanwhile, 30.2% of respondents feel that information about funding opportunities is not well disseminated. Additionally, 15.4% of respondents believe that there are insufficient sources providing information about funding opportunities for youth organisations. On the other hand, 14.2% of respondents feel that there are enough sources of information on funding opportunities.

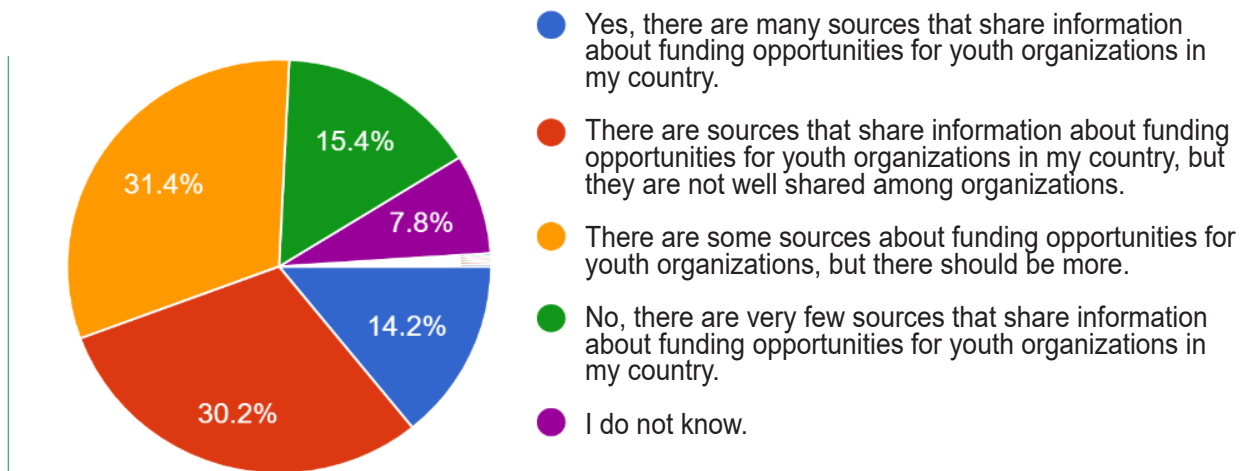


Chart: Youth Providers' awareness about funding opportunities

When it comes to funding opportunities, most respondents believe there is a lack of funding for youth work activities in the region. Specifically, 34.3% of respondents think there are only a small number of funding opportunities, while 22% claim there is a lack of funding opportunities altogether. Additionally, 12.5% of respondents argue that there are very few funding opportunities for youth organisations in the region. However, 14.2% of respondents state that there are enough funding opportunities, and 8.8% believe there are many opportunities. The remaining ones are unsure about the availability of funding opportunities for youth organisations in the region.

This data suggests that, while most respondents perceive a scarcity of funding opportunities, a quarter of them believe otherwise. The situation could be further analysed from various perspec-

tives: a genuine lack of funding (as noted by some focus groups, resulting in a shrinking space for youth work providers in certain locations), a lack of information about available funding, or even complex criteria that need to be met for accessing funding opportunities (such as EU funding opportunities, as highlighted during the qualitative research), which can pose a significant challenge for small and youth organisations.

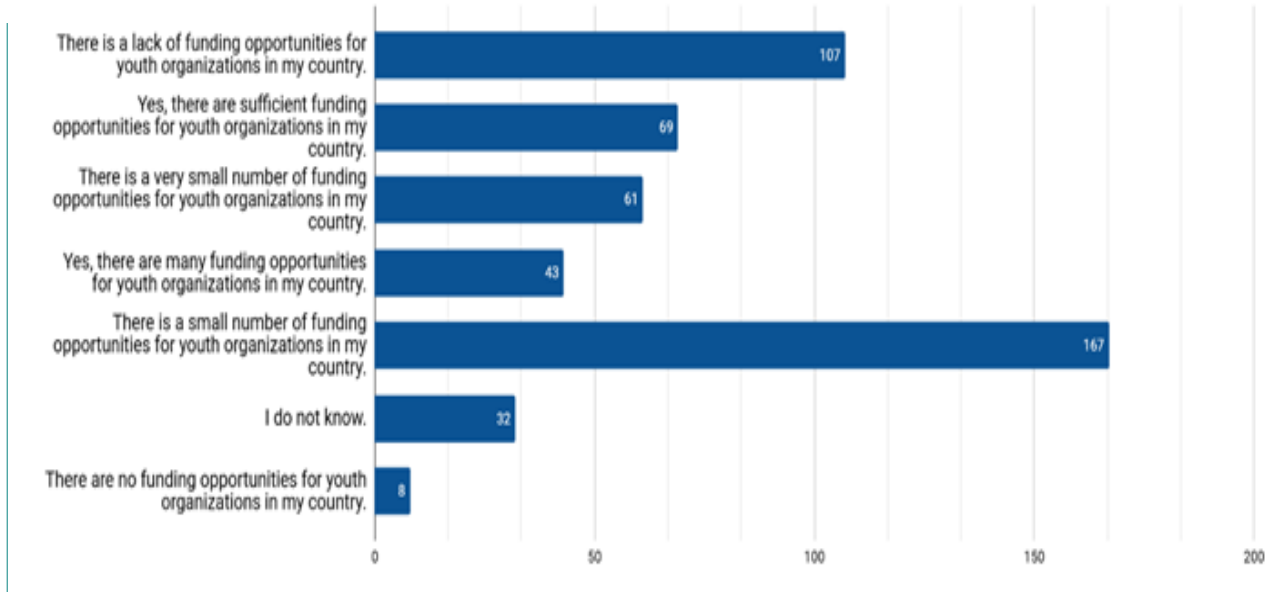


Chart: Funding opportunities for youth organisations

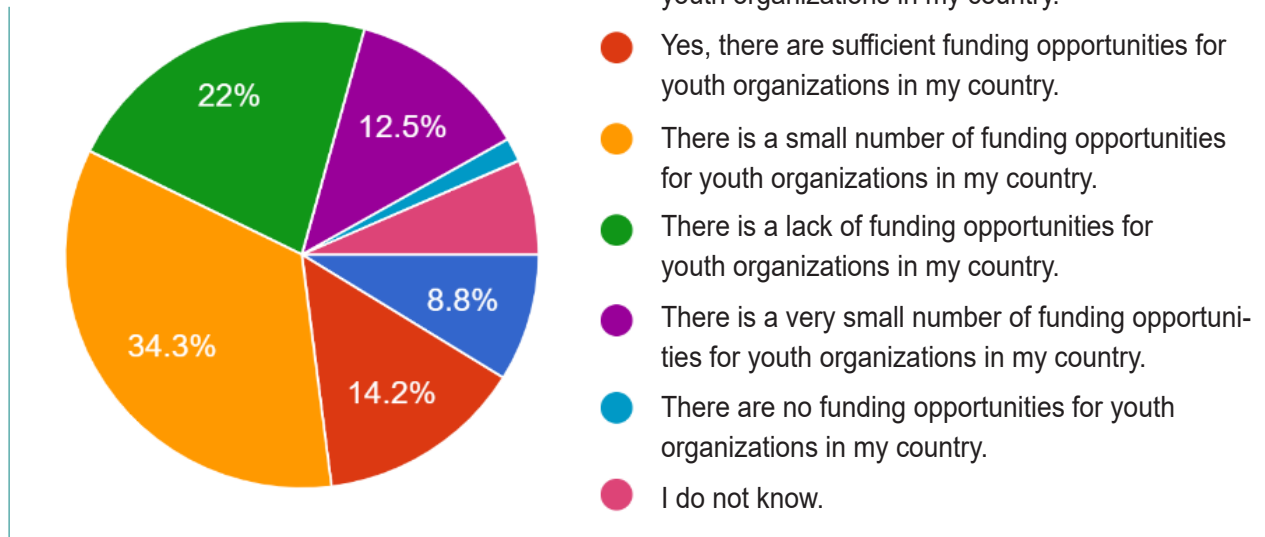


Chart: Funding opportunities for youth organisations

A respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina shared: “They support dozens of associations, with project budgets ranging from 2-3 thousand marks each, without any plan. They (institutions) believe they have supported civil society and think that this is enough for some serious work. You cannot carry out serious activities with such amounts, and unfortunately, this is the situation throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. In certain cases, even such funding is not always available.”

A respondent from Kosovo pointed out: “There is no appropriate funding. Much of our work is highly dependent on international support.”

Another respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina also stated: “In some parts of the country, we have fund allocation, but I believe that, despite what we say about good practices, the funds allocated to organisations are very poorly managed... I would like every municipality to have a budget for youth and for that budget to exist at every level of government, given that we are a complex country in this regard.”

A respondent from Montenegro highlighted: “Additionally, the funding mechanisms need to be made more flexible to address current needs, and separate funding lots should be introduced for organisations with smaller capacities, as large and small organisations cannot apply for the same project funding calls in the same way.”

When it comes to organisational capacity building, which is equally important when applying for funding, a respondent from Montenegro noted: “I would highlight the Sustainability Academy Programme. It was an interesting programme about ten years ago. But it was very good because it helped many organisations in Montenegro during the initial stages of establishing their mission, vision, and strategic thinking. Among them, there were many youth organisations, some of which still operate today.”

## FLEXIBILITY AND SUPPORT FOR INNOVATIVE IDEAS IN YOUTH WORK

Valuing the ideas and innovations of young people should be an integral part of all youth work settings, as it fosters the growth of both the organisation and the young people involved, whether they are volunteers, employees, or simply young individuals engaged in the activities.

As one respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina stated, “I think that when we already have some developed programs, we have to actually fight harder to make it sustainable and for our country to start thinking programmatically, to finance programs that prove to be good. And of course, to take evolution from there, if they sometimes give results, to correct them, to abolish some if they are no longer needed in the future, but simply to start thinking programmatically.”

According to the survey, 21.8% of respondents stated that, based on their experience, youth

organisations encourage their employees and volunteers to present new ideas. A further 38.3% of respondents believe that some organisations actively encourage this. However, 28% reported that organisations generally have a clear structure and expect volunteers and employees to fit into already existing projects or activities. Additionally, 4.2% of respondents claimed that youth organisations are inflexible and do not support new ideas.

These responses suggest that the flexibility of an organisation largely depends on its structural framework. Often, volunteers are engaged in pre-planned projects or activities, highlighting the need for greater flexibility to provide space for volunteers and employees to initiate and lead new activities. However, given that organisations are often highly dependent on available funding, as previously discussed, the answers to this question must be considered within the context of the operational models of youth work providers/organisations.



Chart: Youth organisations providing flexibility and support for innovative ideas

## YOUTH ORGANISATIONS' RESPONSE TO UNEXPECTED CRISES AND CHALLENGES

Youth organisations play a crucial role in every society and community where they operate. Their primary purpose is to address the needs of young people, and they are intrinsically connected to the well-being and development of the communities they serve. However, unexpected events that affect the life of the community, such as the outbreak of COVID-19, also impact youth organisations. In these circumstances, youth organisations must adapt and find ways to cope with the challenges they face.



The question arises: how do youth organisations respond in such situations?

According to the responses, 28.8% of respondents stated that an organisation’s response to unexpected challenges depends on the nature of the challenges themselves. Meanwhile, 25% of respondents believed that youth organisations are generally flexible and able to respond effectively to unforeseen challenges.

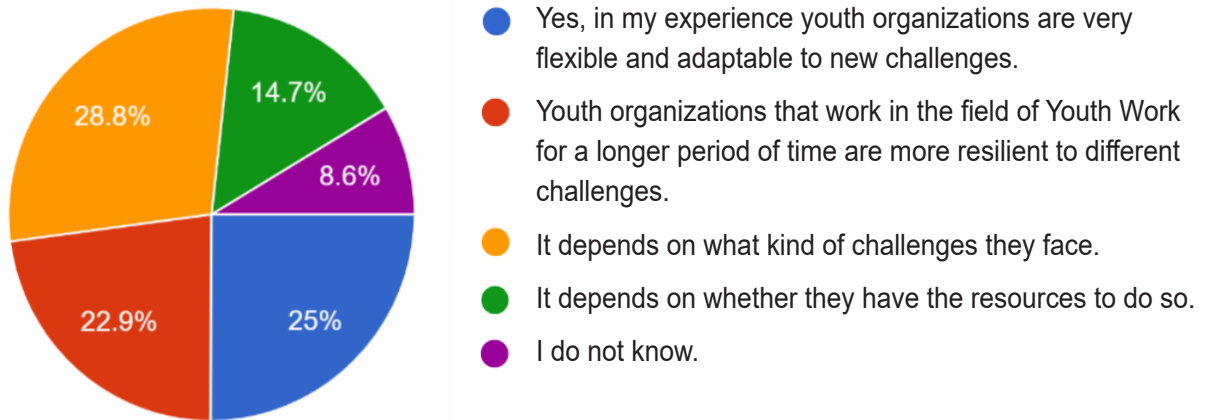


Chart: Youth organisations responding to unexpected challenges and crisis

A further 22.9% argued that organisations with more experience, having been active for a longer period of time, are better equipped to be resilient and adaptable in the face of unexpected challenges. Conversely, 14.7% believed that the resilience and adaptability of youth organisations are primarily determined by the resources they have at their disposal.

From these responses, it can be concluded that respondents view the ability of youth organisations to respond to unexpected challenges as depending on three key factors:

- › The type of challenges faced
- › The experience of the organisation
- › The availability of resources to address the challenges

These insights highlight the importance of organisational flexibility, experience, and resource management in navigating unforeseen circumstances.

## ADAPTING METHODOLOGIES TO THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

One of the fundamental principles of youth work is adapting methodologies to meet the specific needs of young people. This approach ensures that their needs are addressed appropriately, which in turn improves their learning chances. While young people share certain similarities across different contexts, each setting requires tailored working methodologies.

Based on the responses, 33.3% of respondents believe that youth organisations are able to adjust their methodologies effectively only if the employees are sufficiently experienced. Meanwhile, 30.1% of respondents stated that youth organisations are always able to adapt their methodologies to the needs of young people.

Additionally, 21.1% of respondents reported that some organisations lack clear working methodologies, while 2.1% argued that some do not take the needs of young people into account. Furthermore, 13.5% were uncertain as to whether the methodologies used by youth organisations were truly based on the needs of young people.

Overall, respondents indicated that the ability of youth organisations to adapt their methodologies to the needs of young people depends on several factors:

- › The experience of the organisation's employees
- › The clarity of the methodologies employed by the organisation
- › The organisation's awareness of the specific needs of the young people they work with

A respondent from Kosovo shared an example, stating, “We have cases where activities are conducted with specific schools, and only the topic is provided, but we are not sure if they are open to conducting those activities in a way that is appropriate for the children/young people. This is an area we should reflect on—if someone from the school is responsible for ensuring the pupils receive a curriculum in advance to see if it is suitable for them and to help with its selection.”

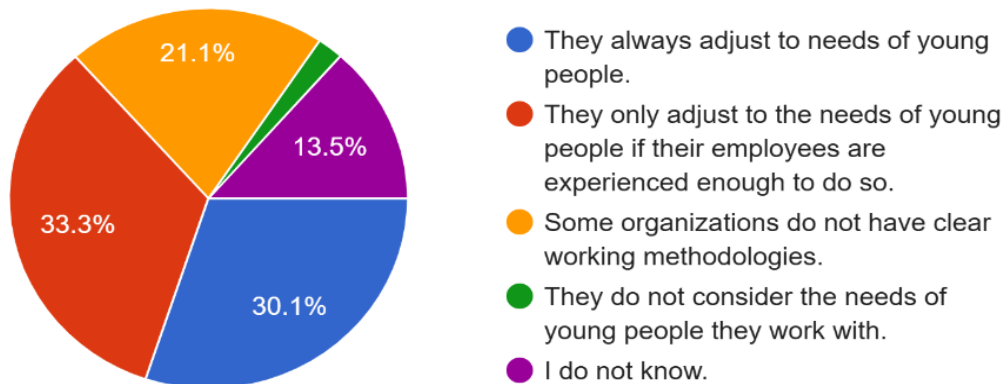


Chart: Adapting working methodologies to the needs of young people

This statement highlights the importance of not only considering the content but also ensuring that the approach taken aligns with the needs and contexts of young people, particularly in formal settings like schools where youth work also takes place, as evidenced earlier.

## PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF YOUTH WORK

Despite the fact that youth work has been actively practised in the Western Balkans region for nearly three decades, it remains insufficiently acknowledged and recognised by both communities and authorities at various levels, as evidenced by both the quantitative and qualitative components of the research.

The largest proportion of respondents (80.6%) indicated that youth organisations primarily present themselves and their activities via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. A further 35.7% stated that youth organisations engage in direct contact with people to present their work, while 33.8% use other forms of media, such as television and web portals. Additionally, 21.5% of youth organisations report presenting their work through meetings with various stakeholders, including politicians and community leaders.

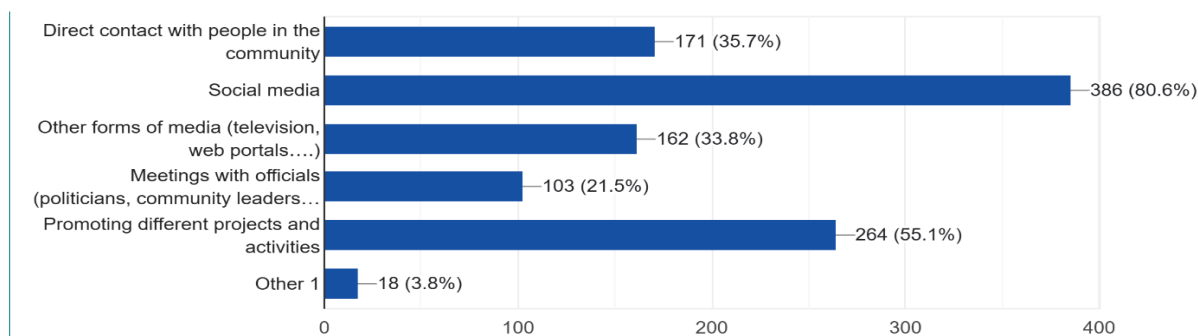


Chart: Presentation of youth work to the wider public

Furthermore, 55.1% of youth work activities are made visible to the broader public through the implementation of various activities and projects.

However, the fundamental question remains: To what extent can the philosophy, essence, and principles of youth work be effectively conveyed to the wider public through these methods?

A respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina remarked: “I would say we also need to be more visible and gain the trust of the parents, as this is very important. There are many young people, or youths who are still underage, and whose parents do not allow them to leave their city to attend any form of education or seminars. Trust should be established through these organisations, so that parents can see it is completely safe, and that they can allow their child to go.”

Another respondent added: “I go to my municipality at least once a month to inform them about what I do with and for young people. Maybe it will spark some interest among them, or they might feel ashamed for not doing anything.”

## COMMUNICATING YOUTH WORK PROGRAMMES TO THE MEDIA

Effective communication between youth work providers and the media can serve as a significant tool for presenting youth work programmes to the wider community and relevant stakeholders at various levels. As indicated in previous responses, youth workers and youth organisations typically employ different types of media to present their work, with social media platforms being the most commonly used.

While the selection of media types is crucial for public outreach, the timing of their communication is equally important. Targeting the specific media platforms used by the intended audiences—such as young people and their parents—should be a key consideration.

According to the respondents, 18.9% believe that youth organisations communicate regularly with the media to present their activities, while 13.2% of respondents reported that youth organisations engage with the media only occasionally, when they consider it necessary. Furthermore, 14.2% of respondents indicated that youth organisations typically communicate with the media only at the launch of a project, primarily to notify the public about the initiative.

Regarding the types of media used, 21% respondents pointed to the lone use of social media platforms—such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter—as the main means through which youth organisations engage with the wider public.



Chart: Communication with media about project youth organizations implement



# LAWS AND REGULATIONS PERTAINING TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH WORK

Various official documents and regulations address the position of young people and youth work practitioners, such as the Laws on Youth, various youth policies, as well as other key frameworks like Strategies for Youth, Action Plans, and more.

These documents are often the result of collaborative efforts between youth organisations and institutions, and they outline the country’s approach to improving the lives of young people within their communities.

According to the research, youth work practitioners are most familiar with the Strategies for Young People. A significant 63.2% of respondents indicated that they are aware of these Strategies, while 51.5% are also familiar with other Youth Policies.

Furthermore, 51.3% of respondents reported knowledge of Youth Laws, and 44.9% are aware of Youth Action Plans.

A respondent from Albania stressed: “Young people’s voices aren’t heard when decisions are made, even though they directly affect them. Local Youth Councils established recently in municipalities have shown some improvements in involvement of young people in local decision making.”

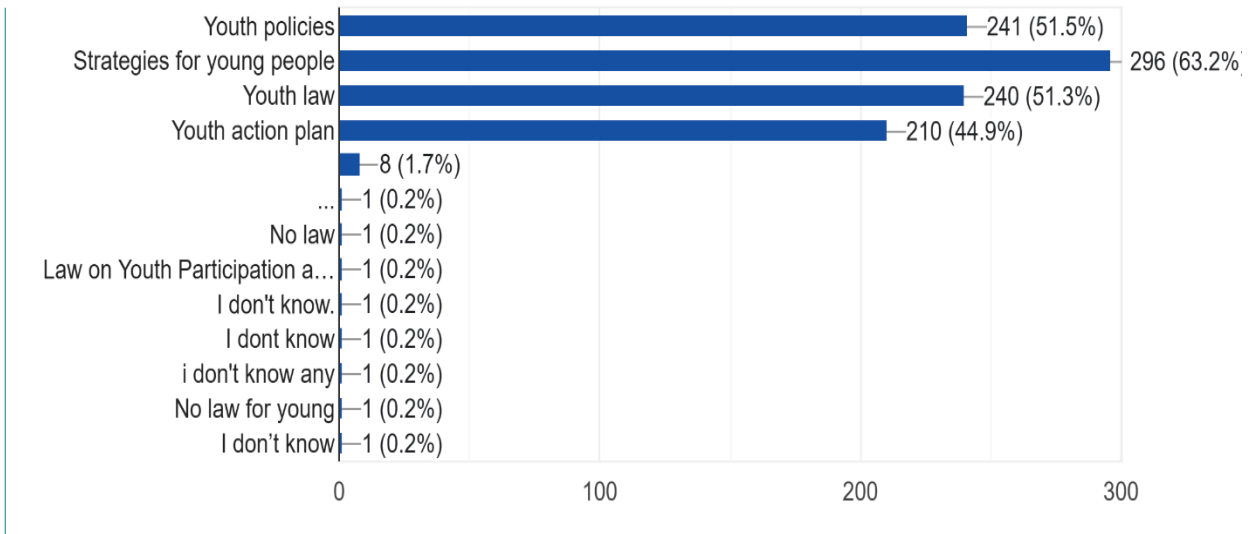


Chart: Laws and regulations pertaining to young people and youth work

## INVOLVEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING

Youth agency, particularly in terms of expressing their needs and engaging them meaningfully in socio-political processes within their communities or countries, is crucial for fostering an environment in which young people feel valued and empowered. It is important that institutions recognise young people and youth organisations as active agents and contributors to social change, rather than passive observers of the processes that affect their lives.

The findings suggest a significant gap in this regard. A large proportion of respondents (53.5%) believe that young people and youth organisations are rarely included by institutions in processes that are of direct relevance to them. Further to that, 15.8% of respondents indicated that young people and youth organisations are not involved at all in decision-making processes.

Conversely, 20% of respondents expressed the view that young people and youth organisations are represented within governmental bodies and are able to voice their needs to relevant stakeholders. 10.6% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question.

In light of these findings, it is evident that participation of young people and youth organisations in processes that directly affect them must be increased. Recognising young people as partners, rather than merely observers, is essential for fostering a more inclusive and participatory socio-political environment.

“Literally in every one of their (young people’s) replies, you can see that they are desperate, you can see that they don’t trust anyone, you can see that they are tired of not being heard, so they no longer seem to care enough to make an effort to be heard,” a respondent from Montenegro highlighted.

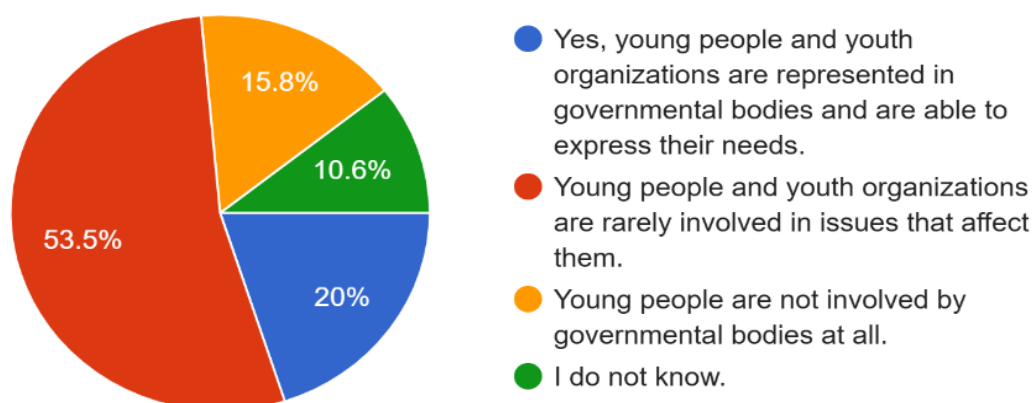


Chart: Involvement of young people/youth organizations in decision-making

## REPRESENTATION OF YOUTH ORGANISATIONS IN POLICY-MAKING BODIES

Youth organisations and youth workers are actively engaged in the lives of young people and the broader community on a daily basis. Their experience offers valuable insights for decision-makers, enabling them to make effective and informed decisions that impact young people.

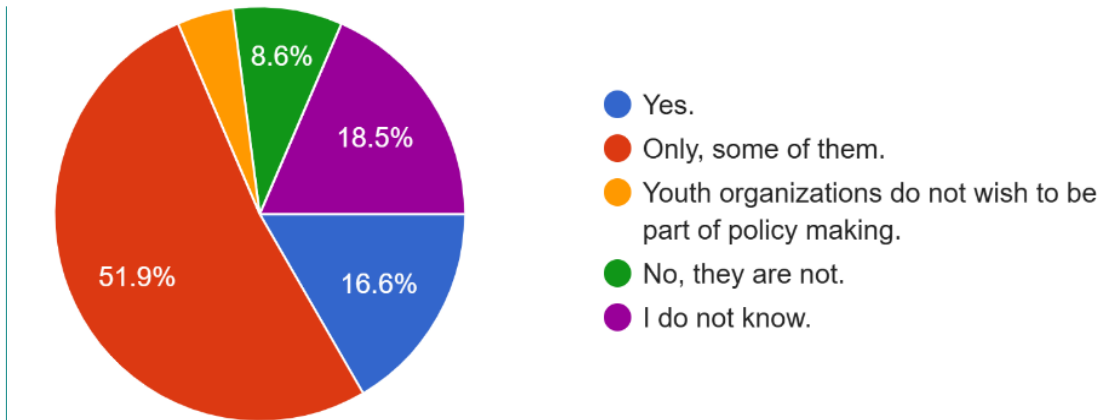


Chart: Representation of youth organisations in policy-making bodies

Decision-makers must also acknowledge that not all young people are involved in the work of youth organisations, and it is crucial to ensure that mechanisms are in place to hear the voices of those who remain unorganised.

Responses to the question regarding youth organisations' involvement in bodies that create youth policies were varied. Notably, the majority of respondents (51.9%) indicated that only some organisations are involved in policy-making bodies, which raises the question of why others are not.

8.6% of respondents stated that youth organisations are not involved in these bodies, while only 16.6% of respondents claimed that youth organisations are actively engaged in the bodies responsible for developing youth policies.

A respondent from Serbia noted: "One challenge is that only a small number of our member organisations are involved in the process of creating public policies at the local level, due to a lack of capacity, resources, or simply because it falls outside their scope or focus. Another challenge is how to translate national-level expectations into actions at the local level. What may be lacking is better coordination and strengthening the capacities of local organisations and practitioners to advocate for greater formal recognition of youth work through public policies."

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH POLICIES DEVELOPMENT

One aspect of contributing to the improvement of young people's lives is the participation of youth organisations and young people in the development of youth policies that concern them.

Empowering young people means involving them meaningfully in decision-making processes and supporting their development as active members of society, rather than passive observers of the processes around them. This can be achieved through meaningful participation in setting priorities, such as policy development.

Namely, 36.1% of respondents trust that youth organisations are involved only in certain phases of policy-making, but do not make any important decisions, while 24.1% believe that young people are involved in decision-making only if they are associated with a youth organisation or working in one.

On the other hand, 14.9% of respondents claim that youth organisations are involved in all processes that concern young people, while 14.5% believe that young people and youth organisations are not involved in such processes at all.

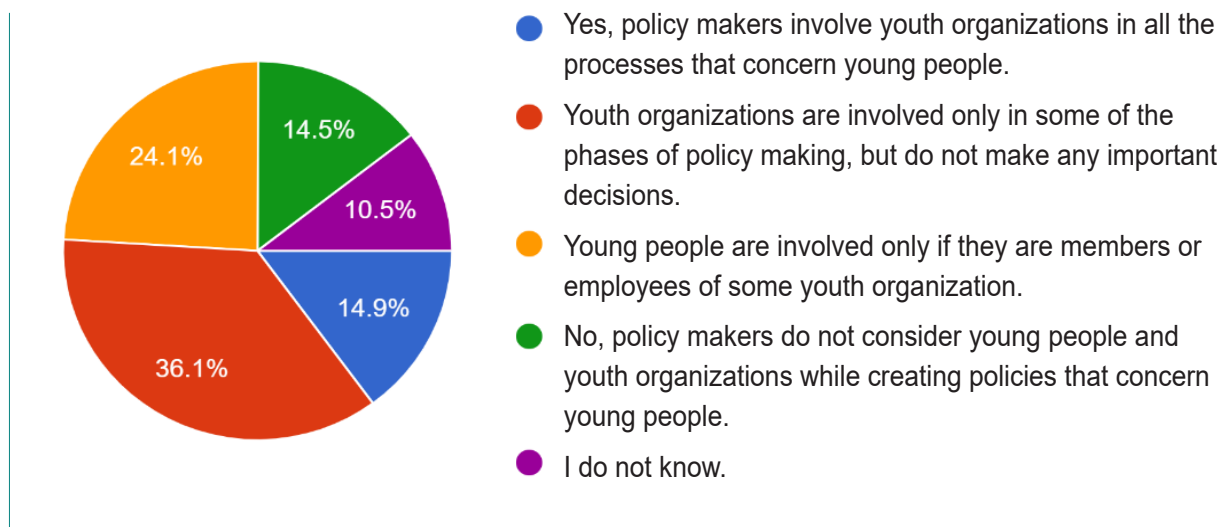


Chart: Involvement of young people and youth organisations in policy development

Although this represents regional data, the qualitative research has shown that this involvement varies not only in national contexts but also at sub-national and local levels, depending on the recognition of youth organisations and their work.

A respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina noted: "Through the Youth Centre (Mrkonjić),



changes to laws related to rare diseases in the Federation and Republika Srpska were initiated, and that was one of the most significant reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, started by a youth centre. Thanks to this initiative, many children received therapies without which they would certainly not be alive today. It is an incredible story of how activism can bring about change.”

A respondent from Kosovo noted: “We, as the Roma community, have advocated for 20 years for our language rights to be officialised, and we have succeeded. After 20 years of voluntary advocacy, we, as an NGO in Prizren, managed to have our language added to the list of official languages. Therefore, I think that, thanks to our contribution over the years, we have managed to bring about changes in Prizren and prove that it is a multi-ethnic city with diversity and inclusiveness in this aspect. Our role as youth workers, civil society organisations, and volunteers has had a significant impact on policy changes within the state, especially in the democratisation process.”



- T**he research has identified various challenges and areas for improvement. These include:
- › Recognition of youth work as a formal profession
  - › Recognition of youth work by the wider public (social and political recognition)
  - › The provision of more high-quality training and professional development opportunities for youth work practitioners
  - › The creation of an enabling environment for youth work to thrive (e.g., infrastructure, funding, etc.)
  - › Increased cooperation between youth organisations and institutions
  - › Support for networking and the exchange of practices among youth work providers and the wider youth work community
  - › The further development of quality youth work services for all young people

The recognition of youth work, including formal, social, and political, remains a key challenge. Across the region, progress has been made, albeit at a slow pace, considering that youth work has been established for nearly three decades across the Western Balkans. The priority action remains the political recognition of youth work, particularly the youth worker profession, along with accompanying standards, job descriptions, qualifications, codes of ethics, job classifications, and other prerequisites necessary to ensure long-term sustainability in this regard.

Social and formal recognition must follow, focusing on increasing visibility and institutional acknowledgement of youth work's societal contributions. This would enable more appropriate planning on both the institutional and youth organisations/providers' sides. As some respondents noted, they often find themselves in situations where they need to explain what youth work actually involves. This raises the question: how do youth work providers present themselves to the wider public? A large number of respondents (81.1%) indicated that youth organisations present their activities through social media. Only 18.9% of respondents reported that youth organisations regularly engage with the media, while 13.2% stated that communication with the media occurs only when deemed necessary.

Regarding funding, youth work providers generally feel there is a lack of funding opportunities and are seeking greater governmental involvement in supporting their efforts. It is important to note that various legal and strategic documents, such as youth laws, youth strategies, and youth action plans, recognise funding for youth organisations and the provision of spaces for youth work activities. Yet, their implementation requires additional efforts to achieve the set goals. Youth work must respond effectively to the ever-changing needs of young people, and adequate funding is essential in this regard. At present, the youth sector is heavily dependent on international funding, which is not a sustainable solution.

Cooperation between youth work practitioners and youth organisations is another area that needs further development. This cooperation can take various forms, including: (1) sharing information about funding opportunities, (2) organising joint activities at local, national, or regional




levels, and (3) exchanging examples of good practice. According to the respondents, there is a lack of information regarding funding opportunities, and some believe that information about available funding is not being adequately shared. Another issue raised by respondents is the sharing of good practice examples between youth work practitioners and youth organisations. While 32.6% of respondents believe that youth work providers organise meetings to share best practices, 31.8% report that such examples are shared only when necessary.

The continuous education of youth workers is another significant issue that was highlighted, with funding being a recurring obstacle. Respondents noted that youth worker training generally takes place when funding is available, and that continuous education, including professional development, opportunities are crucial to meet young people's needs and deliver high-quality youth work programmes. Youth organisations are recognised to typically offer youth worker education through training sessions, seminars, and similar activities. In contrast, accredited universities (domestic or foreign) provide such education only in rare cases.

The online questionnaire indicated that the majority of youth work is implemented in urban areas, with rural areas lagging behind. While the research did not provide empirical evidence on the reasons for this disparity, it can be assumed that factors such as funding, the lack of infrastructure for these activities, and the depopulation of rural areas—where young people often move to larger cities or abroad—play a significant role. Various other groups are also involved in ad hoc, project-based youth work provision, and further support in this regard is necessary.





**COUNTRY  
CONSIDERATIONS  
AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS**

Qualitative research, i.e., focus groups, not only provided respondents with the opportunity to reflect on topics of interest from a regional perspective, but also from a national viewpoint, as the discussions were held at the country level. This approach offered valuable insights into the current state of affairs and contributed to the formulation of country-specific recommendations, as outlined below, based solely on the results of the focus group meetings.

## ALBANIA

Youth work in Albania has made notable progress in recent years, demonstrating a positive impact, with needs assessments playing an important role in shaping the priorities of youth work provision. However, a noticeable disparity exists between the opportunities available to young people in Tirana and those in other districts, particularly in rural areas.

Youth in other districts are generally less engaged and have fewer opportunities for participation. Positive examples include youth centres in cities such as Berat and Permet, which provide training and skill development programmes, benefiting not only the young people involved but also entire communities. An increase in volunteerism among youth has also been noted in recent years.

Several initiatives highlight the positive effects of youth work in Albania. For example, the Child Protection Office in Kamez has handled approximately 150 cases annually since its establishment in 2012. The “Shkendija” (Spark) initiative in Maliq engages young people in democracy, aiming to keep them involved in their local communities rather than emigrating. Additionally, the Youth Centre in Permet offers skill-building opportunities. Respondents noted that the Youth Work Permit has significantly boosted youth engagement, empowering young people to promote local democracy.

Respondents rated the current situation with respect to youth work in their communities, reflecting varying experiences across different regions. Key challenges include a lack of infrastructure and dedicated spaces for youth, insufficient funding, and limited opportunities for engagement for young people, all due to inadequate support for youth work provision. Geographic disparities are also a significant concern, with rural areas often lacking information and engagement opportunities compared to urban ones, as already noted. Youth emigration remains a critical issue, and there is a strong call for greater political will to support youth work activities and programmes.

Respondents identified three main challenges: a lack of infrastructure (particularly youth centres), insufficient funding, and a limited range of youth work opportunities. These issues require additional resources, including human resources.

### Priority Recommendations:

- › Establish and maintain accessible youth centres, particularly in areas where they are currently lacking.
- › Create a dedicated budget for youth work programmes and activities in each municipality, with a focus on young people outside the capital city.



› Expand the availability of high-quality youth work programmes and activities by investing in youth work. This includes the recognition and standardisation of the youth worker profession, as well as providing training and education, especially in light of the upcoming revisions to the Law on Youth and related laws governing professional occupations.

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Youth work has had a profound impact on both young people and communities across the country, with several respondents sharing compelling stories of transformation. Notably, exchange programmes, including Erasmus+, have brought about positive changes, especially for young people from rural areas. Some youth councils and youth clubs have also played a key role in the personal development of young people, providing them with opportunities for growth and progress. Additionally, youth work has also played an important role in bridging ethnic divides in smaller communities, fostering reconciliation and cooperation by bringing together young people from different backgrounds.

Youth work is widely seen as a vital platform for social and individual development, with youth activism emerging as a powerful force for social change, particularly in rural areas. Youth work in Bosnia and Herzegovina covers a broad range of issues, from humanitarian efforts to environmental protection, human rights, and even space exploration, demonstrating its diverse and far-reaching impact.

However, youth work providers continue to face several challenges, such as limited space, insufficient funding, and a lack of political, social and formal recognition. While these obstacles persist, the development of strategic youth policy documents for both entities and the Brčko District is a step forward. Respondents emphasized the need for sustainable funding to support successful youth work programmes and ensure their long-term viability. One major issue highlighted was the lack of political recognition of youth work, which has led to inconsistencies in service provision. In some communities, the standards for youth work are determined either personally or organisationally, as no formal frameworks exist. This underscores the need for greater recognition of youth work and additional training to improve the professionalism and effectiveness of youth workers.

Despite these challenges, the determination of youth work providers remains strong. There is a clear sense of optimism that the youth sector has significant potential for growth and development, capable of creating lasting positive change in local communities and beyond.

### **Priority Recommendations:**

- › Ensure recognition of youth work as a profession across Bosnia and Herzegovina through Youth Laws in all parts of the country, accompanied by strategic youth policy documents that support the sector's growth and professional standards.
- › Build more youth clubs and centres across the country to provide young people with spaces

for development, engagement, and community-building.

› Secure consistent funding for youth work programmes by involving youth priorities in public budget planning, with an emphasis on enabling support for smaller youth organisations.

## KOSOVO

Respondents noted that youth work programmes have had a significant positive impact, including increased confidence, improved social skills, and greater community involvement among young people in Kosovo. However, rural areas still lack youth work programmes compared to urban centres.

A positive example of a youth work programme was highlighted by a Roma youth organisation, which uses theatre and cultural activities to support Roma culture and youth, fostering engagement between the Roma and majority communities. These initiatives not only demonstrate the potential of Roma youth but also foster community cohesion in the communities in which they operate.

Respondents consistently emphasised the importance of actively involving youth in all aspects of the work, including planning, decision-making, and delivery of activities. Limited access to resources, such as funding, training materials, and institutional support, was identified as a major challenge, when it comes to youth work. In terms of youth work practitioners, there was a clear need for more training programmes for youth work practitioners to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively manage diverse groups, thereby expanding the provision and improving the quality of youth work provision.

The recently adopted Law on Youth has provided legal definitions of youth organisations, youth, and organisations for young people, while also establishing the State Commission on Youth as the highest inter-institutional body responsible for coordinating the implementation of sectoral and inter-sectoral youth policies. Youth work has been recognised within this framework, although its full implementation, including through the adoption and enforcement of relevant bylaws, is yet to be realised.

The focus group discussion acknowledged that while youth work faces several challenges, particularly related to funding and resources, it holds substantial potential for positive impact.

### **Priority Recommendations:**

› Increase funding opportunities specifically for youth organisations, as youth work practitioners are seeking employment in other sectors due to a lack of funding. A dedicated funding stream for the youth sector is essential, as the current grant scheme also covers sports and culture.

› Develop infrastructure by building youth centres and clubs across Kosovo. › Although there is one youth centre in Prizren, it is insufficiently spacious, and another youth centre caters only to a specific community, leaving others feeling excluded.

› Adopt and enforce by-laws regulating the certification of youth volunteering in line with the recently passed law, ensuring that volunteer work, including youth work in volunteer settings, is properly recognised.



## MONTENEGRO

In Montenegro, youth work is primarily conducted outside formal educational settings. Several respondents highlighted its role in enhancing youth resilience and promoting social cohesion, with youth work regarded as a social good that “grows without institutional support” and “prevails over youth policy” by laying the foundation for its implementation. Respondents rated the state of youth work slightly better at the local level compared to the national level, citing stronger cooperation between local authorities, youth organisations, and other community stakeholders. However, overall ratings were medium to low. The lower national score reflects limited practical progress despite the adoption of policy documents.

Some of the youth work programmes outlined by youth organisations include Service Learning Programme, Youth Parliament, Leadership and Developmental Community Youth Work, Zdrave veze (Healthy Relationships), Prilike (Opportunities), Aj’ rabotaj (Get to Work), Football Together (a regional initiative), EYCA, and Podržani = Osnaženi (Supported = Empowered). Several of these programmes now receive institutional support, ensuring a level of sustainability. One notable example of a successful and sustainable youth work programme is the “Barbara Prammer” workshops. Initially launched by a youth organisation, the programme is now an integral part of the Montenegrin Parliament’s activities. It ensures that all primary school children have the opportunity to participate in workshops, visit Parliament, and learn about the decision-making processes.

Youth work in Montenegro faces several systemic challenges, including a lack of coordination at both national and local levels, delayed legislative developments, and poor enforcement of strategic/policy documents. Civil society (youth organisations and organisations for youth) struggles with insufficient recognition, a shrinking space for sustainable operations, and inconsistent government support. Youth workers lack professional recognition, limiting their status, respect, and institutional backing. Respondents emphasised the need for capacity-building opportunities through education, training, and professional development. The legislative and institutional frameworks are inadequate, with changes to the Law on Youth delayed for a longer period. This impacts key issues such as the lack of recognition for youth work as a profession, the absence of youth work programme standards, and weak cooperation between youth clubs/centres under different authorities.

### Priority Recommendations:

- › Enable the recognition and standardisation of youth work by amending the Youth Law, ensuring its professional delivery by qualified youth workers and other relevant practitioners.
- › Develop a platform for cooperation and exchange among key youth work providers (primarily youth clubs and youth centres) by reinforcing the youth work community of practice, including through the newly established Association of Youth Work Practitioners.

› Increase budgetary allocations for youth work programmes at both national and local levels, provide more flexible funding opportunities for youth work organisations, and amend the Law on Local Self-Government to prioritise youth issues, using these priorities as a foundation for allocating funds to local youth organisations.

## NORTH MACEDONIA

In recent years, the youth sector in North Macedonia has actively advocated for the recognition of youth work, with increased support from institutions, yielding some positive outcomes. The youth work community of practice, comprising youth workers, youth centres, umbrella networks, smaller youth organisations, and youth work education providers, has united in its efforts to foster a more supportive environment for both youth policy and youth work development.

In towns where youth clubs are operational, various models of practice have been implemented. Youth organisations also run numerous high-quality youth work programmes and projects. Institutional developments have brought about some progress, yet much remains to be done, particularly in ensuring the enforcement of policies such as youth strategies and relevant laws, and guaranteeing their consistent application across the country. Long-term planning for the future of youth work provision is also critical.

The recognition of youth work is still a work in progress. There is a need for greater efforts to raise the visibility of youth work programmes and services, particularly in highlighting the role of existing youth centres, to engage the broader local community. Additionally, enhancing networking opportunities among youth workers, youth centres, umbrella networks, and related NGOs is crucial for strengthening the sector. Only around one-tenth of municipalities currently have functional youth clubs/centres and dedicated youth workers.

### Priority Recommendations:

› Develop youth centre and club infrastructure across all municipalities to ensure equal access to youth work programmes and activities for young people throughout the country.

› Facilitate networking and knowledge exchange among youth workers and youth centres to learn from successful practices in different towns, adapting them to local needs and bridging knowledge gaps.

› Create a joint strategy and curriculum for youth work education by providers, fostering collaboration to address key training topics and preventing missed opportunities for professional development.

## SERBIA

In Serbia, respondents highlighted that youth work plays a crucial role in community devel-

opment by empowering young people, promoting inclusion, and fostering a sense of belonging. While recognition of youth work still requires progress at various levels, the long-standing practice of youth work provision in Serbia provides a strong foundation and compelling argument for its full recognition. The diverse roles and experiences of the respondents enriched the discussion, offering valuable insights into both the local and national realities.

Several impactful youth work initiatives in Serbia have made notable contributions. CEPORA in Belgrade uses digital tools to integrate young people from foster homes into the community through interactive games, which involve local citizens and foster children, helping to raise awareness about foster homes and promote community inclusion. Art Aparat's choir programme brings together a diverse group of community members, including Roma youth, parents, and youth workers, fostering inclusion and engagement through music and collective activities. The "Izadi with a story" programme, launched during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, provided a platform for young people to share their experiences of living in homophobic families through storytelling, leading some participants to come out to their families for the first time, creating a transformative and emotional experience. Additionally, a participatory city planning programme is being developed, enabling young people to map their needs regarding public spaces and climate change, which directly influences the city's construction plans through their input.

At the national level, respondents noted that the new Youth Strategy and its Action Plan have been adopted, with youth work as one of the five key strategic goals. The importance of enacting and implementing legislation to support youth work provision was emphasised, including the completion of the political recognition of youth work, encompassing professional standards, qualifications, training, and formal education.

At the local level, respondents stressed that engaging local communities and stakeholders is essential for the successful implementation of youth work programmes. Building strong relationships with local authorities, schools, and community organisations is crucial. Continuous training and support for local youth workers to enhance their skills and knowledge is needed, while encouraging collaboration and networking among local youth organisations will help develop a supportive ecosystem for youth work. Secure and sustainable funding is vital for the growth of youth work, requiring advocacy for increased municipal funding and the exploration of alternative funding sources to support youth work programmes and initiatives.

### **Priority Recommendations:**

- › Ensure full recognition of youth work by establishing professional qualification standards, providing formal education for youth work, and ensuring adequate working conditions for youth workers. While youth work is recognised in the Codebook of Vocations and a job standard has been adopted, further steps are needed to implement full recognition in practice, including the development of professional qualification standards.
- › Develop a new Youth Law to recognise youth work, establishing a legal definition of youth workers and creating a national body responsible for licensing, ensuring consistent quality in youth work

provision across the country.

› Coordinate and operationalise Youth Space Standards created in 2023, making further efforts to ensure that youth spaces are adequately equipped and continuously improved, offering suitable environments for effective delivery of youth work programmes.



**KEY REGIONAL  
CONSIDERATIONS  
AND WAY  
FORWARD** >>>>>>>

**“In all my years of experience, I’ve never seen youth work make a situation worse—only better.”**

**(Long-time youth worker from Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting on the positive outcomes of youth work in the region)**

**Y**outh work has been present across the Western Balkans region for nearly three decades. While there are acknowledged differences at the country level, as detailed in previous sections, many of the challenges faced by youth work practitioners and providers are shared across the region.

These common challenges include the lack of recognition for youth work and young people often not being prioritised in daily political agendas, resulting in youth work itself being sidelined. The needs, perspectives, and views of young people must be responded to in a timely and effective manner, requiring the development of sustainable mechanisms for youth policy enforcement and youth work delivery. Civil society is increasingly recognised as the primary creator and implementer of youth policy and youth work, although there are notable exceptions where planning and partnerships have been strengthened, primarily thanks to the efforts of youth organisations.

National and local cooperation remains a significant challenge across the region, with regional cooperation being even more difficult to achieve. The lack of flexible and domestic funding has led to a shrinking space for youth organisations/youth work providers, which, in turn, appears to have resulted in a reduced number of active grassroots organisations, as noted by respondents. At the same time, international funding often requires well-developed organisational capacities, which many youth organisations struggle to meet.

Political recognition of youth work, including recognition of youth work as a profession, remains a priority. Additionally, there is a pressing need for increased training and professional development opportunities for youth work practitioners, including supervision and mentorship.

As a respondent from North Macedonia remarked, “Where youth work is neither recognised nor supported, one might question whether personal satisfaction is enough to sustain motivation in the long term.”

The research has also shown positive progress, particularly in the physical spaces where youth work programmes are taking place. According to 65.9% of respondents, youth work is primarily organised in youth centres, and 50.8% report that youth work also takes place in youth clubs. This marks a step forward in terms of infrastructure, though further investment is required in this area. These responses also highlight a diversification in the settings where youth work is carried out, with a variety of youth work approaches being implemented, such as outreach and detached youth



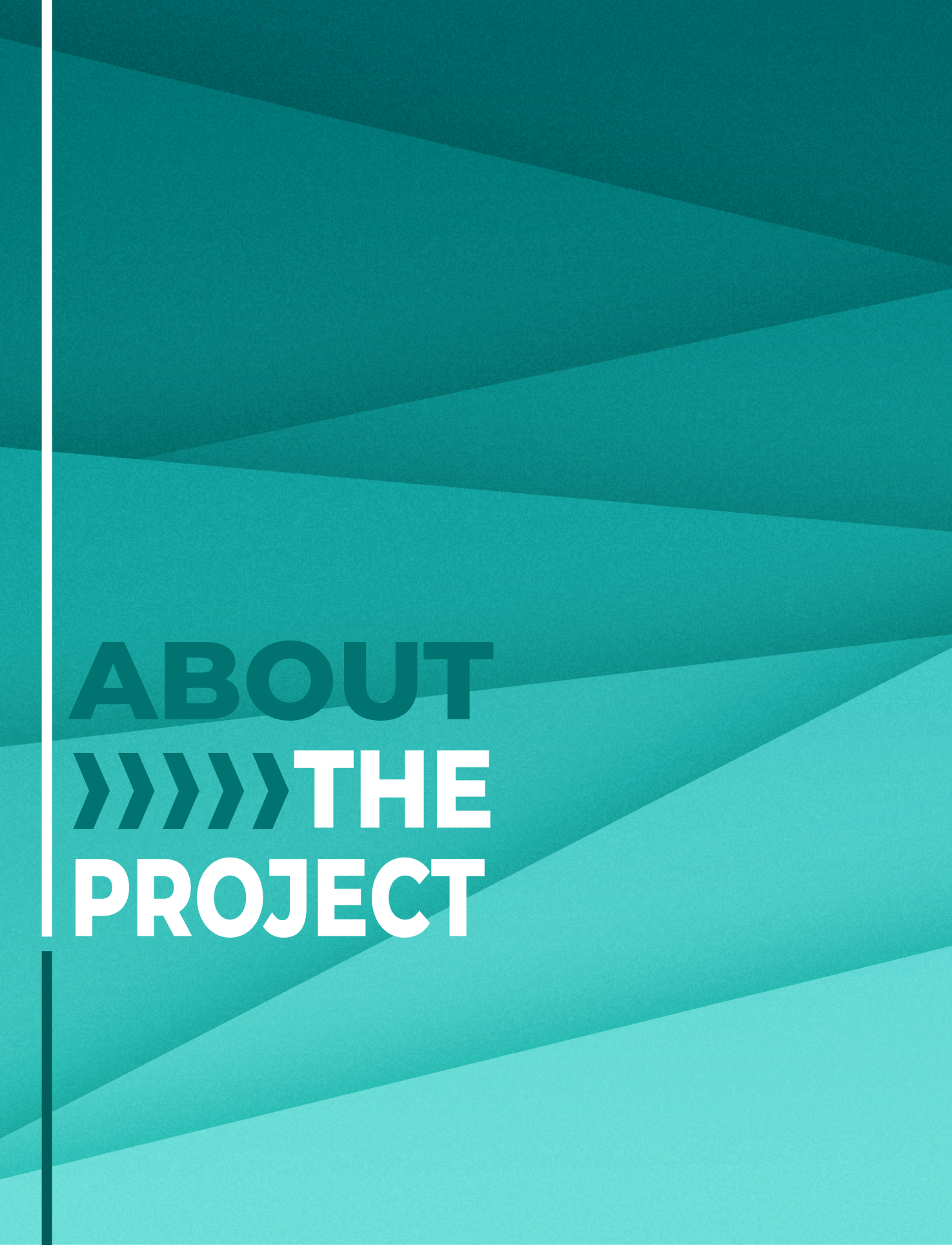
work. Certain national progress has also been identified, as detailed in other sections of the study.

The research has also identified several areas where youth work in the Western Balkans region must improve in order to make a more substantial impact on young people's lives and the wellbeing of the community at large. These areas include: (1) the improvement of cooperation between relevant institutions and youth organisations, (2) the need for further efforts in fostering cooperation between youth organisations and youth work providers, (3) an increased focus on the recognition of youth work, (4) the expansion of educational and learning opportunities for youth workers, and (5) ensuring that youth work is accessible to all young people across the entire region.

This research has undoubtedly highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of youth work in the Western Balkans. It has pointed out to areas for improvement and has provided insight into the directions it should take. However, it has also raised new questions that warrant further research, and discussions among youth work providers and relevant institutions.

**Based on the findings of this research, the following actions are recommended for consideration at the Regional level:**

1. Support formal, political and social recognition of youth work across the region, thereby enabling its further quality development.
2. Increase cooperation among existing communities of practice by offering more networking opportunities at the regional level, enabling stakeholders to connect, exchange and partner.
3. Provide additional funding for regional youth work projects to further advance the development of youth work locally.
4. Strengthen the capacities of youth organisations across the region to better absorb EU funding and provide more flexible EU funding for small grassroots youth organisations.
5. Support the development of local youth clubs and centres, as well as regional ones, with a view to expanding youth work infrastructure.
6. Offer more capacity-building and professional development opportunities for youth work practitioners on emerging topics relevant to young people, ensuring that youth work practitioners can stay abreast of various developments in young people's lives.
7. Further prioritise the alignment of youth policy and strategic youth work documents with those of the EU, including the EYWA, to ensure guidance for development and implementation, as well as a foundation for monitoring and evaluation.



**ABOUT  
»»»»»THE  
PROJECT**



**Project Title:** *Unlocking Potentials of Youth Work in the Western Balkan Region*

**Project Duration:** 1 November 2023 – 31 October 2025

**Funding Sources:** Erasmus+ Programme – European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), and the Ministry of Public Administration of Montenegro

**Key objectives** of the project include:

- Acknowledging the multilayered impact of youth work and creating favourable conditions for the development and standardisation of quality youth work in the Western Balkans region.
- Networking and enabling the growth of the youth work community of practice in the Western Balkans to support the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Work Agenda.
- Supporting youth work recognition processes across the Western Balkans region by effectively communicating the impact of youth work to diverse audiences.
- Fostering meaningful multi-sectoral and regional cooperation to enhance the position of young people in the Western Balkans, particularly those with fewer opportunities.

**Key Activities:**

The project conducts a comprehensive needs assessment to identify challenges and opportunities in youth work practices in the Western Balkans region. Additionally, tailored capacity-building programmes for youth workers are being designed and delivered, focusing on professional standards, programme development, and evaluation. The project also facilitates networking events and knowledge-sharing platforms to enhance collaboration among youth work practitioners in the Western Balkans, advocating for the recognition and support of youth work at local and national levels.

The project supports the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Youth Work Agenda in the Western Balkans, focusing on the promotion and quality assurance of youth work. It fosters cooperation among the youth work community of practice, strengthens organisations working with young people in non-formal learning settings, and enables the professional development of youth work practitioners, facilitating the sharing of experiences and best practices.

**Target Audience:**

The project targets a wide range of stakeholders, including youth workers and practitioners, youth organisations and other civil society organisations, local and national authorities responsible for youth-related policies, and stakeholders involved in youth work initiatives.

### Expected Impact:

By addressing the identified challenges and implementing capacity-building and policy initiatives, the project aims to achieve several outcomes. These include improved quality and standardisation of youth work programmes across the Western Balkans region, enhanced cooperation and collaboration among youth work practitioners and organisations, increased recognition and support for youth work by policymakers and stakeholders, and the empowerment of young people through improved access to high-quality youth work services and opportunities for personal and community development.

Project is implemented by **Forum MNE** (Montenegro) in partnership with **Youth for Social Change** (Albania), **Human Rights Education Youth Network** (Belgium), **PRONI Center for Youth Development** (Bosnia and Herzegovina), **NGO THY** (Kosovo), **Union for Youth Work** (North Macedonia), and **National Association of Youth Workers - NAPOR** (Serbia).

