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Title:

Youth Work Quality Framework Across the Western Balkan Region

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### CONTENT

**INTRODUCTION** 

5	YOUTH WORK DEFINITION
6	VALUES OF YOUTH WORK
7	PRINCIPLES IN YOUTH WORK
8	ETHICAL APPROACH
9	LEGISLATION
10	RECOGNITION OF YOUTH WORK
12	FUNDING FOR YOUTH WORK
13	PROFESSIONALISM
14	SAFE ENVIRONMENT
15	YOUTH SPACES
16	QUALITY ASSURANCE
16	NETWORKING AND PARTNERSHIPS WITHIN THE SECTOR
17	INTERSECTORAL COOPERATION
18	CONCLUSION
ANNEX 1	LIST OF PARTICIPANTS, DESIGN THINKING LAB, SARAJEVO, SEPTEMBER 2024

### **I** Introduction

outh work plays a critical role in supporting the personal and social development of young people, fostering their active participation in society, and promoting inclusion and cohesion within communities. In the Western Balkan region, the establishment of a Regional Framework for Youth Work is essential to address the shared challenges faced by youth workers and young people and to harmonize efforts across borders. This Framework aims to guide youth work providers, practitioners, and decision-makers in improving the quality and accessibility of youth work services. By fostering collaboration and standardizing practices, the Framework seeks to create stronger, more inclusive communities and create preconditions to empower young people as active contributors to societal development.

The **European Youth Work Agenda**¹ (EYWA), introduced as a strategic framework between the European Commission and Council of Europe, provides a comprehensive framework to enhance the quality, recognition, and sustainability of youth work across Europe. It emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive systems, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and empowering youth workers with the skills and tools needed to address emerging challenges. This Regional Framework aligns with the principles outlined in EYWA, contextualizing them to the realities of the Western Balkan countries while contributing to the overarching goals of the Agenda.

The content of this document is the result of a collaborative effort by the youth work community of practice from six Western Balkan countries: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*2, Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia. Representatives from these countries convened during a five-day seminar held in Sarajevo in September 2024. Their insights, experiences, and expertise formed the foundation of this Regional Framework, ensuring that it reflects the realities and aspirations of youth workers and young people in the region.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the participants of the Sarajevo seminar for their invaluable contributions. Their dedication and commitment to advancing youth work have been instrumental in shaping this Framework. This document is a testament to the strength of collaboration and the shared vision of a more cohesive and impactful youth work sector in the Western Balkans.

<sup>1</sup> https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1201(01)

<sup>2</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

## II Youth Work Definition

outh work is a structured and purposeful practice designed to engage young people through a variety of activities, including social, cultural, educational, environmental, or political endeavors. These activities are created by, with, or for young people, fostering their voluntary participation and addressing their diverse needs and interests.

Rooted in the principles of non-formal and informal learning, youth work aims to empower young people to develop their full potential, actively contribute to their communities, and engage as responsible citizens. Delivered by trained youth workers—both paid professionals and dedicated volunteers—youth work provides guidance and opportunities for personal and social development of young people.

In the Western Balkan region, youth work represents a vital tool for addressing local challenges, promoting civic engagement and peace building, and supporting young people in navigating transitions into adulthood. By fostering inclusivity and adaptability, youth work creates a supportive environment where young individuals can thrive and become active contributors to society.

Following definition is introduced by youth work community gathered in Sarajevo seminar:

Youth Work is a planned and structured practice that involves a wide range of social, cultural, educational, environmental, or political activities. These activities are designed by, with, or for young people, either individually or in groups, and are rooted in young people's voluntary participation. Using non-formal and informal education methods, youth work aims to inspire, support, and empower young people in alignment with their unique needs and abilities during their free time. It fosters their personal growth, social development, and active citizenship, contributing to the well-being and progress of their communities and the society as a whole. Youth work is carried out by dedicated professional youth workers, both paid and volunteers.

## III Values of Youth Work

alues form the foundation of quality youth work, shaping how services are delivered in fostering environments that empower young people to achieve their full potential and actively participate in their communities. This section outlines the core values agreed upon by the youth work community in the Western Balkans, reflecting the region's unique social and cultural context while aligning with European principles of youth work:

**Empowerment:** Supporting the development of young people in their journey towards independence and encouraging them to take control of their own lives and become an active part of society.

**Inclusion:** Ensuring that every young person, regardless of their background, has an equal opportunity to participate and feel valued.

**Respect:** Treating others with dignity, valuing their ideas, opinions, and feelings.

**Innovation**: Recognizes the importance of creativity, originality, and openness to new ideas in youth work practices.

**Diversity:** Recognizing and appreciating individual differences as a strength, fostering a richer, more understanding communities.

**Tolerance**: Being open and accepting of different perspectives, beliefs, and practices.

**Equality and Equity**: Providing the same opportunities for all while addressing individual needs to ensure fairness.

**Empathy**: Understanding and sharing the feelings of others (young people and others), creating a compassionate environment.

**Belonging and Safety**: Creating safe spaces for the youth; environments where young people feel safe, accepted, and free to express themselves without fear or discrimination.

**Voluntary based**: Emphasizing that it is not obligatory and participation of youth in youth work programs is a choice, allowing young people to engage out of their own interest and motivation.

**Social Cohesion**: Building unity and strengthening relationships, fostering trust and collaboration among young people to create inclusive and connected communities.

**Solidarity**: Encouraging mutual support and collective action, empowering young people to stand together and advocate for fairness and shared goals.

## IV Principles in Youth Work

he principles guiding youth work, including active participation, support, and open-mindedness, provide a framework for youth engagement. Principles ensure that youth work remains responsive, inclusive, and reflective of the needs and aspirations of young people. They are essential for promoting active citizenship, lifelong learning, and social inclusion.

The principles guiding youth work establish a framework that ensures its effectiveness and responsiveness to the needs of young people. Subsequent principles create a robust framework for implementing impactful and inclusive youth work across the Western Balkan region:

- # Guidance: Offering direction and advice to help young people navigate challenges and make informed decisions.
- **# Support**: Providing emotional, social, or practical assistance to empower youth to achieve their goals and overcome difficulties.
- **# Meaningful participation**: Encouraging and equipping young people to participate in decision-making processes and planning, creating and realization of programs, as well as working in the community to raise awareness of decision makers and create conditions for the youth to participate, express their opinions and their opinions to be valued.
- **# Youth centered approach:** Prioritizing the needs and voices of young people, ensuring they shape and influence youth work activities and decisions affecting them.
- # Reaching young people: Engaging with young people in their environments to ensure youth work is accessible, relevant, and responsive to their needs.
- **# Open-mindedness**: Encouraging flexibility, curiosity, and willingness to consider new ideas, perspectives, and approaches in youth work.
- # Critical thinking: Encouraging youth to question, analyze, and evaluate information and situations, helping them make informed choices and decisions.
- # Professionalism: Maintaining high standards, ethics, and integrity in youth work practice.
  - o **Having boundaries**: Establishing clear limits to maintain a healthy, professional relationship between youth workers and young people.

- Flexibility: Adapting approaches and activities to meet the changing needs and circumstances of young people.
- Taking responsibility: Being accountable for one's actions, decisions, and commitments. Being reliable, fulfilling obligations, and demonstrating a sense of duty towards oneself, the youth and the community.
- # Personal development: Supporting the growth and learning journey of young people, helping them reach their full potential.
- **# Creating opportunities**: Actively providing young people with chances to engage in various experiences that promote their personal, social, and professional development. This can include access to educational programs, internships, volunteer roles, leadership activities, creative projects, etc.
- # Interculturalism: Fostering collaboration and understanding across different cultures, enriching the community.
- # Respecting and applying human rights: Ensuring that human rights principles are upheld in all youth work activities and interactions.
- **# Cooperation**: Collaborating with various sectors and stakeholders to provide comprehensive support for young people.

### V Ethical Approach

n ethical approach is central to youth work, ensuring that its practices align with the highest standards of integrity, fairness, and respect. It is essential in safeguarding young people's rights, promoting diversity, and creating safe environments for learning and growth. Ethical guidelines are of great importance in creating supportive environments for young people while promoting inclusivity and social justice.

Youth workers are committed to **respecting the individuality** of each young person, recognizing their unique identities, emotions, and capabilities. This respect fosters an inclusive environment where diversity is valued, and no individual faces discrimination or stereotyping.

**Confidentiality** is a cornerstone of ethical youth work, safeguarding the privacy of young people and maintaining the trust placed in youth workers. Ethical practices also emphasize empowerment, supporting young people in making their own decisions and taking control of their lives. This approach promotes self-reliance and equips young people with the confidence to navigate their

personal and professional journeys.

**Safety** is paramount in youth work, encompassing physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions. Youth workers ensure that young people can engage in activities that challenge and educate them while maintaining a secure and healthy environment. Additionally, youth work is deeply committed to promoting social justice, advocating for equality, and encouraging respect for diversity within society.

The **professional integrity** of youth workers requires them to uphold professionalism at all times, including during private or informal discussions. Unethical behaviors, such as making derogatory remarks or reinforcing stereotypes, are incompatible with the values of youth work. This principle ensures that youth workers embody the values they promote, reinforcing trust, respect, and inclusivity in all aspects of their work.

**Accountability** is integral to ethical youth work. Youth workers adhere to professional ethical codes, demonstrating responsibility and reliability in their interactions and decisions. In countries where such codes do not yet exist, efforts should be made to develop and implement them to ensure consistency and uphold the highest standards across the youth work sector.

By embracing these ethical principles, youth work across the Western Balkan region builds trust, fosters growth, and creates equitable opportunities for young people to thrive.

### VI Legislation

egislation serves as a critical foundation for the development and recognition of youth work, yet across the Western Balkan region, its presence and implementation remain inconsistent.

According to EYWA, comprehensive legal frameworks are essential to professionalizing youth work and ensuring its alignment with societal priorities.

Comprehensive legislation at the national level is necessary to define youth work clearly, including its scope, principles, and objectives. Such definitions create a shared understanding among stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, and young people themselves. National and regional laws should also integrate youth work into broader policy frameworks, ensuring its alignment with education, health, social welfare, and employment strategies.

A key legislative priority is the establishment of procedural guidelines for youth work, including standards for accreditation, the creation of safe spaces, and the regulation of youth spaces. These measures provide structure and consistency, enabling youth work to deliver high-quality services. Moreover, legal provisions must ensure that youth workers receive adequate training, resources, and institutional support to carry out their roles effectively.

- 1. Draft and adopt comprehensive youth and youth work laws at the national and regional level in countries where they are absent.
- 2. Define clear roles and responsibilities for youth workers, supported by legal frameworks that regulate their professional standards.
- 3. Incorporate youth work into national/regional youth strategies to ensure alignment with broader social and economic goals.
- 4. Allocate specific budget lines for the implementation and oversight of youth work legislation.
- 5. Facilitate cross-sector collaboration by embedding youth work into related policy areas, such as education, health, employment and social welfare.

## VII Recognition of Youth Work

ecognition efforts involve promoting youth work's societal value and integrating it into formal education and labor markets.

Recognition is fundamental to strengthening youth work and ensuring its sustainability across the Western Balkan region. However, youth work remains undervalued in many countries, with limited societal, formal, and political acknowledgment. Strengthening recognition at multiple levels is essential to highlight youth work's contributions to personal development, community cohesion, and societal progress.

Recognition operates on four key levels3:

**# Self-recognition**: Youth workers must embrace and articulate the value of their contributions. Empowering youth workers with professional development opportunities and validation of their skills can enhance their confidence and effectiveness.

**# Social recognition**: Communities, young people, and families must view youth work as transformative and essential. This includes raising awareness about its benefits through targeted campaigns and success stories.

<sup>3 &</sup>lt;a href="https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/about-recognition">https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/about-recognition</a>

- **# Formal recognition**: Establishing official certifications, standards, and frameworks for youth work can integrate it into national education and labor systems.
- # Political recognition: Policymakers must acknowledge youth work as a vital sector, incorporating it into national strategies, allocating resources, and establishing legal provisions to support its growth.

### 1. Self-recognition:

- Provide training and workshops to strengthen youth workers' understanding of their roles and impact.
- Develop platforms for youth workers to share experiences and best practices, fostering a stronger sense of professional identity.

### 2. Social recognition:

- Conduct national and regional campaigns to highlight the societal benefits of youth work, focusing on its impact on young people and communities for various actors.
- Showcase successful youth work projects and personal stories through media and public events.

### 3. Formal recognition:

- Establish certification systems for youth workers, aligned with international standards, ensuring recognition of their skills and qualifications.
- Integrate youth work qualifications into national education systems and labor market frameworks.
- Develop mechanisms to validate non-formal learning outcomes acquired through youth work.

### 4. Political recognition:

- Advocate for youth work to be included as a priority in national youth strategies and action plans.
- Secure dedicated budget lines for youth work initiatives and the professional development of youth workers.
- Build partnerships between youth work organizations and government institutions to foster collaborative policymaking.

## VIII Funding for Youth Work

unding is essential to maintain and improve youth work services, with support from public and private sectors. Sustainable funding is fundamental to the growth and development of youth work to ensure the accessibility, quality, and long-term impact of youth work initiatives.

Sustainable funding is a cornerstone of quality youth work, yet it remains a significant challenge across the Western Balkan region. EYWA highlights the importance of allocating adequate resources to support youth work and ensure its long-term viability. Without consistent financial support, youth work programs risk losing their effectiveness and reach, limiting their potential impact on young people.

Youth work primarily takes place at the local level, making the involvement of municipalities in funding crucial. Dedicated budgets at the municipal level provide the necessary resources for grassroots initiatives, enabling youth workers to address the unique needs of their communities. Additionally, long-term financial commitments are essential to maximize the impact of youth work. Short-term project funding often leads to instability and inefficiency, whereas sustained programs foster deeper engagement and measurable outcomes for young people.

#### Recommendations:

### 1. Governmental and municipal support:

- Establish national and municipal budget lines dedicated to youth work, ensuring consistent funding for operational costs, program delivery, and staff salaries.
- Encourage municipalities to prioritize youth work funding, as local initiatives directly address the needs of young people in their communities.
- Develop long-term funding schemes for youth work programs to replace the shortterm project cycle, promoting continuity and sustainable impact.

### 2. Private sector engagement:

- Foster partnerships between youth work organizations and private companies, emphasizing corporate social responsibility initiatives that benefit young people, in line with agreed ethical principles and values.
- Introduce tax incentives for businesses that support youth work programs financially or through in-kind contributions.

### 3. International and regional funding:

- Maximize participation in EU funding opportunities, such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, to support cross-border collaboration and capacity building.
- Encourage regional partnerships to attract international funding for joint youth work initiatives.

### 4. Capacity Bbuilding for fundraising:

- Train youth work organizations in diversifying funding sources, including grant writing, sponsorship development, and crowdfunding.
- Establish networks to share best practices in securing and managing funds effectively.

### IX Professionalism

rofessionalism is a critical element in the development and recognition of youth work as a distinct field. Skilled, ethical, and qualified youth workers are needed to ensure the delivery of high-quality services to young people and credibility of youth work. Across the Western Balkan region, efforts to professionalize youth work vary significantly, with some countries establishing clear frameworks for training, certification, and career development, while others lack formal structures.

The professionalization of youth work begins with the establishment of clearly defined roles and responsibilities for youth workers. These roles should be supported by standardized occupational frameworks and competency models that differentiate youth work from other related fields, such as teaching or counseling. Furthermore, formal education pathways, such as degree programs and accredited courses, are essential to developing a skilled and knowledgeable workforce. Non-formal training opportunities must also be expanded to ensure that existing youth workers can enhance their competencies and stay up-to-date with emerging practices.

#### Recommendations:

### 1. Defining roles and competencies:

- Develop national competency frameworks for youth work, outlining core skills, responsibilities, and standards.
- Differentiate youth work from other occupations to establish its unique professional identity.

### 2. Education and training:

- Introduce formal education pathways, such as university degree programs, specifically focused on youth work.
- Expand non-formal education and training programs for youth workers, addressing both foundational skills and advanced specializations.
- Promote regional collaboration to establish standardized training curricula and qualifications.

### 3. Certification and licensing:

- Implement certification systems to validate the competencies of youth workers and ensure recognition of their qualifications.
- Develop mechanisms for the periodic renewal of certifications to maintain professional standards.

### 4. Ethical standards and support:

- Establish and enforce professional ethical codes to guide youth workers in their practice.
- Create support systems, such as mentorship programs and peer networks, to foster continuous learning and professional growth.

### X Safe Environment

outh work must provide a safe environment that ensures young people's physical and mental well-being and personal growth. Safeguarding youth in all youth-related activities is central to youth work, enabling young people to engage freely and confidently.

Ensuring the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of young people is essential for creating a supportive environment in youth work activities. A safe environment fosters trust and inclusion, enabling young people to engage meaningfully and grow in a supportive and inclusive atmosphere.

A safe environment allows young people to participate freely, express themselves without fear of discrimination, and build positive relationships with youth workers and peers. Ensuring safety requires robust protocols to manage risks, address potential challenges, and promote mental and emotional well-being. Transparency in organizational practices further reinforces a sense of trust and security among participants.

- 1. Develop and enforce safety standards for youth work spaces, including physical infrastructure and online platforms.
- 2. Integrate mental health support services into youth work programs to address emotional well-being.
- 3. Provide training for youth workers on conflict resolution, trauma-informed practices, and safeguarding protocols.
- 4. Foster inclusive environments by promoting diversity, equity, and accessibility in all youth work activities, allowing youth space to freely express themselves.

### XI Youth Spaces

outh spaces play a crucial role in fostering community, creativity, and learning among young people. Safe and accessible environments empower youth to participate actively, develop skills, and grow within their communities. These spaces—whether youth centers, clubs, virtual platforms, or informal gathering places—provide opportunities for connection, engagement, and personal development, ensuring that young people feel included and supported.

In the Western Balkan region, many communities lack adequate youth spaces, limiting opportunities for participation and engagement. Youth spaces serve as vital hubs for learning, collaboration, and personal development, providing young people with environments that inspire creativity and foster belonging.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 1. Prioritize the development of youth spaces (physical and virtual) in local and national strategies, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity.
- 2. Secure funding for the construction, maintenance, and operation of youth spaces, particularly in underserved areas.
- 3. Employ youth workers as professional staff and ensure funds for continuous youth work programs.
- 4. Design youth spaces that are flexible and adaptable to accommodate various activities and programs.
- 5. Engage young people in the design, management and governance of youth spaces to reflect their needs and preferences.

### XII Quality Assurance

uality assurance is critical to maintaining high standards in youth work and ensuring programs effectively achieve their objectives. Monitoring and evaluation processes are of great importance to enhance the quality and impact of youth work initiatives.

Quality assurance involves regular assessment of programs and feedback mechanisms to identify areas for improvement. By adopting evidence-based practices and outcome measurement tools, youth work organizations can demonstrate their effectiveness and secure support from stakeholders.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 1. Develop minimum national/regional quality standards for youth work programs, aligned with regional and international best practices.
- 2. Implement regular monitoring and evaluation processes to assess program impact and identify areas for improvement.
- 3. Establish feedback mechanisms to incorporate the perspectives of youth workers, young people and other stakeholders.
- 4. Promote the use of evidence-based practices and data-driven decision-making in youth work.

# XIII Networking and Partnerships within the Sector

ollaboration among the youth work community of practice strengthens youth work's reach and impact. Partnerships are key to fostering comprehensive youth services. Networking and partnerships within the sector are vital for enhancing the reach, quality, and sustainability of youth work. EYWA highlights the importance of collaboration within the youth work sector to share resources, knowledge, and best practices.

Strong networks foster capacity building, encourage innovation, and enable youth work organizations to address shared challenges. Partnerships with governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, and regional networks enhance the visibility and impact of youth work.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 1. Establish National/Umbrella Youth Work Associations to unify youth workers.
- 2. Provide financial and logistical support for the creation and operation of these associations.
- 3. Establish a regional youth work network to facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing and foster advocacy initiatives.
- 4. Promote joint initiatives and projects that address common challenges and priorities in youth work.
- 5. Provide capacity-building opportunities for youth workers to enhance networking and partnership skills.

## XIV Intersectoral Cooperation

ntersectoral cooperation is vital for enhancing the quality, accessibility, and impact of youth work by integrating it with other sectors such as education, health care, social welfare, and employment. EYWA emphasizes the importance of building partnerships and creating coordinated systems that address the multifaceted needs of young people. By working collaboratively across sectors, youth work can contribute to more comprehensive and effective support systems for youth.

Intersectoral cooperation enables youth work to leverage resources, expertise, and networks from other sectors, enhancing its capacity to address complex social challenges. Partnerships with social welfare institutions can provide young people with access to essential services, while collaboration with educational institutions can foster learning opportunities and skill development. Health care partnerships can address mental and physical health needs, ensuring holistic well-being, and connections with the private sector can create pathways to employment and economic independence.

To achieve effective intersectoral collaboration, clear communication, shared objectives, and coordinated strategies are essential. Governments, youth work organizations, and other sectors must work together to align their efforts, reduce duplication, and maximize the impact of their initiatives.

### 1. Strengthen intersectoral partnerships

- Foster partnerships with key sectors, including education, health care, social welfare, and employment, rural to create integrated support systems for young people.
- Promote collaboration between youth work organizations and state authorities to ensure policy alignment and coordinated action.

### 2. Establish platforms for dialogue and coordination

- Develop regular national and regional forums and platforms where stakeholders from different sectors can share insights, strategies, and best practices.
- Encourage the inclusion of youth workers in policy making discussions within other sectors to ensure their perspectives and expertise are represented.

### 3. Develop joint strategies and initiatives

- Create intersectoral strategies that align the goals and activities of youth work with those of other sectors to enhance efficiency and impact.
- Implement joint initiatives addressing common priorities, such as youth unemployment, mental health, and social inclusion.

### 4. Support cross-sector training and capacity building

- Provide training for youth workers and professionals from other sectors to build mutual understanding and cooperation skills.
- Encourage joint capacity-building programs that address the shared challenges of supporting young people.

### **XV** Conclusion

he Youth Work Quality Framework Across the Western Balkan Region serves as a comprehensive guide aimed at fostering and strengthening youth work development in the region. By addressing key aspects such as values, principles, legislation, recognition, funding, professionalism, and intersectoral cooperation, this framework provides actionable recommendations to support youth workers, youth work organizations, youth centers, and policymakers in creating a cohesive and impactful youth work ecosystem.

Youth work is a vital tool for empowering young people, promoting active citizenship, and fostering

social inclusion. In the Western Balkan countries, where young people face unique challenges, the establishment of strong, accessible, and sustainable youth work systems is essential. This framework highlights the importance of collaboration across sectors, standardization of practices, and capacity building to ensure that youth work effectively addresses the needs of all young people, particularly those in underserved and marginalized communities.

This document emphasizes the shared responsibility of all stakeholders—youth workers, youth organizations, youth centers, and policymakers—to work together in implementing the recommendations outlined in each chapter. By aligning efforts and investing in the professionalization, recognition, and sustainability of youth work, the Western Balkan region can create a supportive environment where young people can thrive and contribute meaningfully to their societies.

The **Youth Work Quality Framework** is not only a roadmap for addressing current gaps and challenges but also a vision for the future of youth work in the Western Balkans. By adopting and adapting the guidance provided, stakeholders can build a robust youth work sector that nurtures the potential of young people and contributes to the development of resilient, inclusive, and democratic societies across the region.

Annex 1 – List of participants, Design Thinking Lab, Sarajevo, September 2024

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