GROWING YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE
A methodology for mapping studies on national youth work ecosystems

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Youth Partnership

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

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Introduction

"**W**ho is doing what and how?" That question was the starting point of the study "Mapping European youth work ecosystems"[1], discussing existing European youth work ecosystems and how they relate to the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda (the Agenda). Commissioned in 2022 by the EU-Council of Europe Partnership in the field of youth, the study was designed to provide a systematic overview of stakeholders and contents, depicting the diversity of stakeholders and their initiatives, as well as highlight any thematic overlaps and gaps. In so doing, its aim was to contribute to discussions on the further structural development of youth work at European level.

The publication "Growing youth work in Europe. Results of the mapping study 'Mapping European Youth Work'" (2025) summarised the study's main elements, including both a description of the European youth work ecosystem as well as a reflection on actors' understanding of and expectations towards the Agenda.

The description of the European youth work ecosystem includes:

► a list of stakeholders, their roles and most relevant projects to the implementation of the Agenda;

► a visualisation of the European youth work ecosystem;

► a non-exhaustive list of European youth work projects connected to the Agenda;

► an ideal European youth work ecosystem, as envisioned by different stakeholders.

Regarding the understanding of and expectations towards the Agenda, the publication discusses:

► what different stakeholders understand the Agenda to mean;

► stakeholders' expectations towards the Agenda, and how they envision the future of European youth work;

► conclusions identifying the challenges of implementing the Agenda and future recommendations.

Due to the availability of resources, the study "Mapping European youth work ecosystems" (hereafter the European study), was limited to what is known as the European youth work ecosystem – a complex network of institutions, organisations, agencies and individuals at *European* level – and how it contributes to the implementation of the Agenda. National, regional and local stakeholders and their projects were

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1 . Atanasov D and Hofmann-van de Poll F (2025): "Growing youth work in Europe. Results of the study "Mapping European youth work ecosystems"". Youth partnership: Strasbourg.

not systematically taken into account. It was decided that the task of systematically analysing the many different youth work architectures and their resulting ecosystems in Europe, with regard to actors´ experiences and implementation of the Agenda, was beyond the scope of one study. As a result, the initiatives and perspectives of certain groups and stakeholders, in particular grassroot youth workers and local organisations, had to be omitted.

However, what the study *did* do was map the big picture of the Agenda's implementation at European level, including the main stakeholders involved, their initiatives and their expectations. In addition to being a general European framework, the study's methodology can also be used as a blueprint for conducting mapping research projects at national level. Such projects could provide an in-depth understanding of the current state of youth work, and point out its gaps and potential for implementing the Agenda on national, regional and local levels. Therefore, the authors of the study decided on writing a second publication. Rather than presenting results of the European study, this second publication presents a methodology on how to conduct a mapping at the national (or sub-national level).

The methodological experiences gained from the European study, as well as insights gained in terms of content, are manifold. These provided a glimpse of the challenges involved in undertaking a mapping study as well as the study's limitations. The national mapping methodology which we propose in this publication has taken these challenges and limitations into account, and from this standpoint, may be used as a guide on how to conduct a mapping study at national level.

In the following, we will present European Youth Work Agenda as the context of a national mapping (section 1.1), followed by a discussion of ecosystem theory (section 1.2). We will then propose a methodology for national mapping, including its aim and purpose (section 2.1) and the actual methodological process (section 2.2). We will say a few words on how the study, once completed, could be used (section 2.3) and close with a discussion of a European outlook (section 3).

1. Context and background of a national mapping study

The idea of conducting a national mapping study of youth work ecosystems did not pop up out of the blue; it derives its context from the developments linked to the Agenda that took place in the aftermath of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, held in December 2020. The European study of youth work ecosystems (2023) provided the first insights into how the ecosystems relate to the Agenda.

1.1. The European Youth Work Agenda

The methodology for mapping national youth work ecosystems presented in this paper is placed in the context of the development of youth work towards an independent European field of action. Following the first and second European youth work conventions, held in 2010 and 2015 respectively, a common ground for youth work was politically defined in a Council of Europe recommendation on youth work.[2] This was followed by the long-term youth-policy strategies set forth in the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027[3] and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030.[4] To further develop youth work in Europe, the European Union, under the Belgian Presidency (January-July 2024), adopted the resolution on "youth work policy in an empowering Europe"[5].

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2. CM/Rec(2017)4 on Youth Work and the explanatory memorandum, available at https://rm.coe.int/cmrec-2017-4-and-explanatory-memorandum-youth-work-web/16808ff0d1, accessed 28 December 2024.
3. Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a Framework for European cooperation in the youth field: the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027. 2018/C 456/01, available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A42018Y1218%2801%29; accessed 28 December 2024.
4. "Council of Europe Youth sector strategy 2030. Engaging young people with the Council of Europe´s values", available at http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-strategy-2030, accessed 28 December 2024.
5. Council of the European Union (2024): Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on youth work policy in an empowering Europe. *C/2024/3526, available at* https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A42024Y03526&qid=1735391478418*; accessed 28 December 2024.*

The 3rd European Youth Work Convention (2020), and from a political standpoint, the EU Council Resolution on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda, identified a series of thematic priority areas to further develop both youth work on the European level (herafter: European youth work) and youth work in the member states (hereafter: youth work in Europe)[6]. These eight thematic areas are:

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

By definition, the Youth Work Agenda is "a strategic framework strengthening and developing quality and innovation in, and recognition of youth work".[7] It proposes specific measures at European, national, regional and local level to develop and strengthen youth work all over Europe. Its advancement and implementation rely on the youth work community of practice, which should be understood as

> a group of people, professional and non-professional, who share the same interests in resolving an issue, improving their skills and learning from each other's experiences. The youth work community of practice comprises stakeholders at all levels, from local to European level",[8] [including] "youth workers and youth leaders, youth work managers, project carriers, accredited and independent youth work organisations, trainers, researchers, educators of youth workers, local communities and municipalities, National Agencies for Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps, youth representations, young people, and policy -makers at all levels of governance.[9]

Implementation of the Agenda on a national level varies greatly from one country to another, which could be accounted for by the different youth work realities in

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6. Hofmann-van de Poll F (2024): "European Youth Work Developments and Challenges. A Meta-Synthesis." In: Youth. Special Issue: Beyond Youth Development: Generating Alternative Narratives of Change in Youth Work. (Ord, J, Coburn, A, Kiilakoski, T and Rannala, I ed., 4:3, p.p. 1194-1210, available at https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030075, accessed 28 December 2024.
7. Council of the European Union (2020): Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda. 2020/C 415/01, available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A42020Y1201%2801%29&qid=1690281817199, accessed 28 December 2024.
8. Council of the European Union (2020): Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda. 2020/C 415/01, available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A42020Y1201%2801%29&qid=1690281817199, accessed 28 December 2024.
9. "Signposts for the future". Final declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, available at https://www.bonn-process.net/downloads/publications/2/3rd%20EYWC_final%20Declaration.pdf, accessed 28 December 2024.

European countries. Research on the youth work ecosystems suggests that countries with well-established youth work structures have less need for the Agenda than those with no or few such structures.[10] Whereas there are many examples of countries with national working groups actively working for the Agenda, including a variety of stakeholders at national and local levels with projects related to its eight thematic areas, research on national agenda implementation or systematic overviews of national youth work ecosystems is scant. To date, the only analysis of this topic is found in the 2023 and 2024 "Survey report on the state of play of national processes within the Bonn process."[11] However, neither this report nor other works provide an analysis of the youth work ecosystems of individual European countries.

Thus, the methodology for national mapping presented here derives its context from the Agenda. In order to strengthen and further develop youth work in Europe, structures are needed along with stakeholders who work together both at European level and in the individual European countries. Mapping and analysing national youth work ecosystems – including a European one – can help to clarify the situation of youth work within a given country and serve as a basis for its further development.

1.2. A note on ecosystems

The term "European youth work ecosystems" was coined early on in the European study. As previously mentioned, it showed the need to determine not only "who is doing what" but also "how", meaning in what context and the ways in which the various stakeholders work together. According to the encyclopaedia Britannica, the use of the term "ecosystem" originates in biology, where it refers to "the complex of living organisms, their physical environment and all their interrelationships in a particular unit of space".[12] As a metaphor, it has found its way into other sciences as well, referring to, in its most simple form, "any complicated system consisting of many different people, processes, activities, etc., […] and the way that they affect each other".[13]

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10. Atanasov D and Hofmann-van de Poll F (2023): "Preliminary results of the study 'Mapping European youth work ecosystems'". Discussion paper prepared for the symposium "Visible value: Growing youth work in Europe", 31 May to 1 June, Budapest, Hungary. Youth partnership: Strasbourg, available at https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/195343642/Discussion+paper+Mapping+European+youth+work+ecosystems.pdf/95086fb8-52e9-c422-6dfe-d262714d3e7a?t=1685462414892, accessed 28 December 2024.

11. Hofmann-van de Poll F (2023): "The state of play of national processes within the Bonn Process – Survey report 2023". Bonn, JUGEND für Europa, available at https://www.bonn-process.net/downloads/publications/52/Bonn_Process_2023_State_of_Play_Survey_Report.pdf?version=1562ccd5ab0957221063fc28aab174aa, accessed 28 December 2024. And Hofmann-van de Poll, F (2024): "The State of Play of National Processes within the European Youth Work Agenda Implementation. Survey Report 2024". Bonn, JUGEND für Europa, available online at https://www.bonn-process.net/downloads/publications/62/1dfe5f8b1b31a54d3be1cf417fc78b41/Bonn-Process_Survey-Report_national-processes_2024.pdf, accessed 28 December 2024.

12. Britannica A J (eds et al.) (last updated 2024), Encyclopaedia Britannica, available at https://www.britannica.com/science/ecosystem, accessed 28 December 2024.

13. Definition of ecosystem from the _Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus_, Cambridge University Press, available at https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ecosystem, accessed 28 December 2024.

According to Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory,[14] which analyses the influence of ecosystems on human development (especially child), an ecosystem that influences the development of children consists of four systems, which are constructed by norms, rules and roles: a microsystem, a mesosystem, an exosystem and a macrosystem. The unit of analysis in the microsystem are the individual areas of the whole ecosystem. These are, for example, "home" or "child-care" with regard to children. The mesosystem looks at the interactions between different microsystems, such as that between home and school. The exosystem, on the other hand, does not directly influence children, but does influence the mesosystem, such as the parents' workplace. Finally, the macrosystem has an influence on all systems and shows how other systems, such as family, school or neighbourhoods, function.

In applying a theory grounded in psychology to a youth work ecosystem, one obtains different units of analysis with which to examine the ecosystem's intricacies. The microsystem would mirror the different priority areas of the Agenda, whereas the mesosystem would focus on the interactions between them, such as that of youth work offers and quality youth work. The unit of analysis of the exosystem would be, for example, the situation of youth work within an individual country. The macrosystem would then describe the country's political or economic situation, how it relates to youth work and how the overall situation of the country, including the youth work system, relates to the European system.

In the European study, this analytical approach based on each of the priority areas or their context (namely eight microsystems and their interlinkages in the mesosytem) proved to be laborious. Instead, participants in the study focused on the structural level, namely the exosystem, and formulated general expectations towards stakeholders.

Accordingly, the concept of organisational or business ecosystems was considered as a framework because it places a stronger focus on the "interactions and exchanges among diverse organisations and actors".[15] Following this type of framework, the key elements of a youth work ecosystem study would be:

- ▶ networks;
- ▶ ties between single units of the networks;
- ▶ interactions and exchanges; and
- ▶ diverse organisations and stakeholders.

In using the biological concept of an ecosystem as a starting point for analysing organisational ecosystems, certain precepts need to be established, which will have an impact on the questions of analysis.[16]

First, ecosystems emerge rather than being designed. In analysing any youth work ecosystem, questions on its genesis and how it developed should be addressed.

14. Bronfenbrenner U (1979): *The Ecology of human development. Experiments by nature and design,* Harvard University Press.
15. Mars M. M. and Bronstein J L (2018), "The promise of the organizational ecosystem metaphor: An argument for biological rigor", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Volume 27, Issue 4, pp. 382-391, available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1056492617706546, accessed 28 December 2024.
16. cf. Mars M M, Bronstein J L, Lusch R F (2012): "The value of a metaphor: Organizations and ecosystems", in: *Organizational Dynamics*, 41(4), pp. 271-80, available at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2012.08.002, accessed 28 December 2024.

Second, the mere existence of an ecosystem does not mean it is healthy, functional and persistent. In analysing an ecosystem, this would raise questions about its functioning and the conditions under which it exhibits these characteristics. In the European study, this led to an analysis of the existing ecosystem as well as an ideal ecosystem.

Third, the key element of biological ecosystems is the interaction between single units. It is this interaction which leads to the emergence of an ecosystem. In the case of the youth work ecosystems, there should be a particular focus on interaction, synergies and overlaps between single stakeholders.

To summarise, ecosystem theories can frame a mapping study on the youth work system within a country in two ways. First, they can serve as a framework for defining and describing the ecosystem in place, focusing not only on stakeholders, but also on interactions, programmes and initiatives. Second, they can help frame further questions to be analysed, such as how the youth work ecosystem emerged, to what extent (and under which conditions) the existing ecosystem is healthy, functional and persistent (or how it could be changed), and how stakeholders within the ecosystem interact.

Taking the above theories into account, we define a national youth work ecosystem as follows:

> a complex network of stakeholders, institutions, organisations, agencies and individuals within a country, or within a subnational political unit, such as a region, which contributes to the implementation and development of youth work, as well as their linkages, and interactions and exchanges between them.

1.3. Youth work ecosystems

In combining the context discussed above and the analytical framework, the following picture of the youth work ecosystem in Europe emerges.

Figure 1: European and national youth work ecosystem interaction

At European level, there is a youth work ecosystem, which, on the one hand, exists as an independent ecosystem and on the other, influences the ecosystems in European countries through its political actions and impulses on youth work and youth work discourse. These ecosystems in turn influence one another as well as the ecosystem at European level. The analysis of the European youth work ecosystem as carried out in the European mapping study described above should therefore be considered as only a first step. The visualisation of the European ecosystem shows that national ecosystems and many of the national activities are a black box.[17]
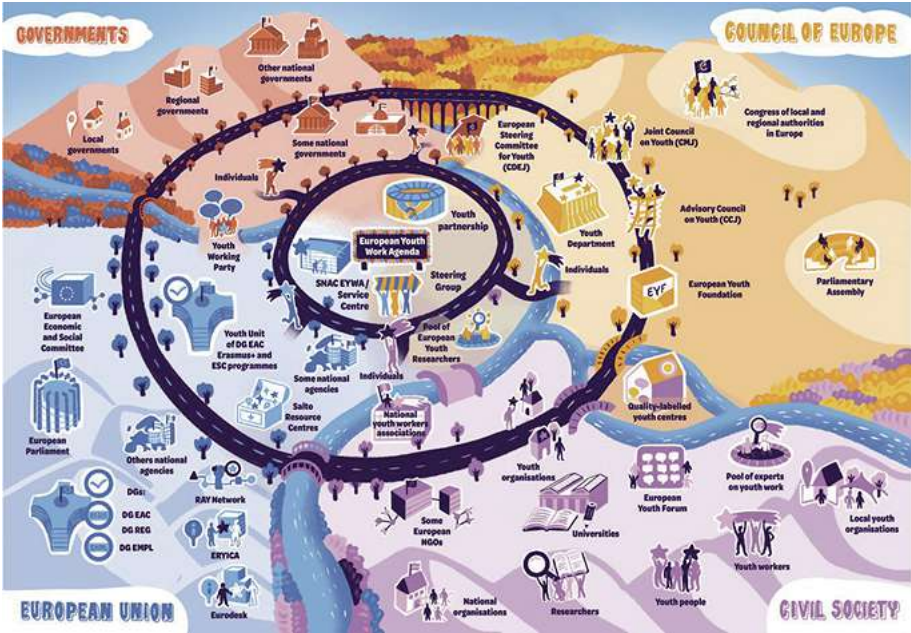
Figure 2: The European youth work ecosystem

Developing youth work in Europe requires not only a systematic view of stakeholders and processes at the European level, but also in individual European countries. Based on the methodology used by the European study, we propose below a methodology for mapping youth work ecosystems at the national level.

17. Atanasov D and Hofmann-van de Poll F (2025): "Growing youth work in Europe. Results of the study "Mapping European youth work ecosystems"". Youth partnership: Strasbourg.

2. Methodological approach

Every study begins with a plan and mapping is no exception. First on the list is to establish the study's purpose, but before we tackle this issue, we would first like to say a few words about the study's key players, namely the commissioning organisations and stakeholders, the researchers who conduct the study and other involved stakeholders.

I AM A STAKEHOLDER ACTIVE IN THE FIELD OF YOUTH WORK, SUCH AS MINISTRY OF YOUTH OR NATIONAL NETWORK

ORGANISATIONS
COMMISSIONING THE MAPPING

RESEARCHERS
CONDUCTING THE MAPPING

AT LEAST ONE RESEARCHER IS FAMILIAR WITH YOUTH WORK

STAKEHOLDERS
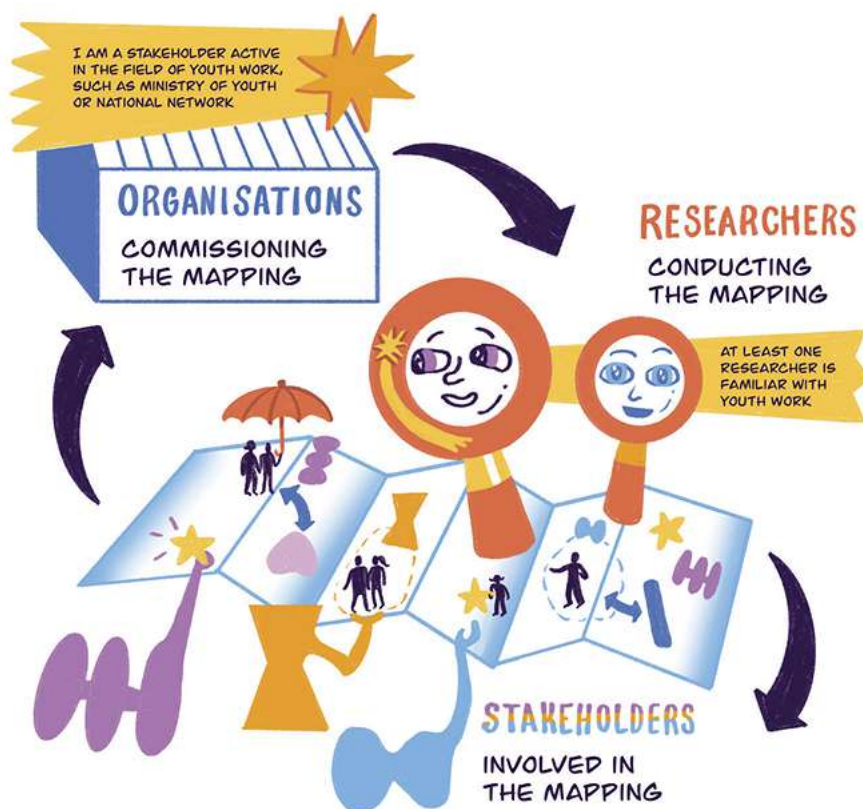INVOLVED IN THE MAPPING

Figure 3: Mapping study key players

The organisation commissioning the study should be a stakeholder active in the youth work field, ideally part of a national or regional government, such as a ministry for youth or a youth agency. This would provide the political background for a politically relevant exercise. The level at which mapping is conducted depends on how a country is organised politically. In centralised states, this would be a national level body, whereas in decentralised states, mapping could be conducted by one or more national or regional governmental bodies.

Another potential commissioning stakeholder could be a national network or umbrella organisation involved in youth work, such as a national youth workers' association or a national youth council. This would endow the mapping study with a stakeholder legitimisation, rather than a political one. In either case, the commissioning stakeholder should first be in a position to include all participants relevant to the mapping process and use the outcomes to further youth work development accordingly.

For the European study[18], two researchers were commissioned who, by dint of their experience and own research, were familiar with the level of analysis – youth work at European level. Preferably, this should be the case with a mapping study of an individual country, however other scenarios are possible in which the researcher is not particularly familiar with either youth work or youth policy, or even knows nothing about the subject at all. In this case, a second consultant, researcher or advisor who *is* familiar with youth work and policy should be added.

The methodology presented here attempts to cover as many scenarios and research challenges as possible, without claiming to be comprehensive. This includes a situation in which mapping could be conducted by a youth worker, youth organisation or government agency instead of a researcher. In an ideal situation, mapping should be entrusted to a team of at least two researchers or consultants, at least one of which has in-depth knowledge of a country's youth work situation. Co-operation between two people who are each knowledgeable about different aspects of a country situation calls for knowledge sharing to complete gaps in information that is crucial. Pooling knowledge will lead to a better grasp of the complexity of a specific youth work ecosystem.
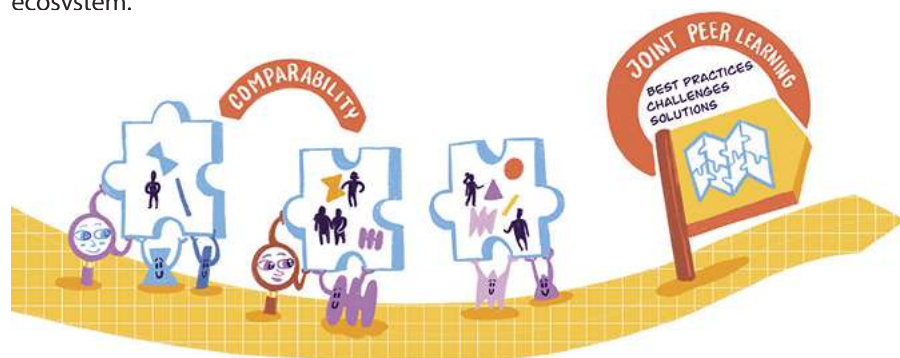
THE METHODOLOGY AS A FRAMEWORK, A GUIDELINE

Figure 4: The methodology as a framework

18. Atanasov D and Hofmann-van de Poll F (2025): "Growing youth work in Europe. Results of the study "Mapping European youth work ecosystems"". Youth partnership: Strasbourg.

Additionally, it is quite possible that, depending on the country context, some of the methodology proposed is incompatible with the situation in a country. The methodology outlined here should therefore be considered a framework or guideline on which basis a national methodology can be designed.

2.1. The study's purpose

The purpose of a national mapping study and its methodology is to provide a systematic overview of the youth work system in a country on a national, regional and / or local level. By applying the proposed methods, researchers and consultants will be able to visualise a national youth work ecosystem, including the main stakeholders and their relations and interactions, as well as main activities, projects and initiatives. Furthermore, these outcomes can be related to the priority areas of the Agenda as well as political documents such as the Council of Europe recommendation on youth work (CM/Rec(2017)4[19] and the Council of the European Union resolution on youth work policy in an empowering Europe[20]. From there, the proposed methodology can help to identify existing gaps, challenges and opportunities, and make recommendations on how to foster youth work development on a national level.

The methodology described here is led by the following research questions:

► How is youth work and youth work development understood?

► Who are the main youth work stakeholders on national level?

► How do they connect and interact with each other?

► How is the process of youth work development co-ordinated and fostered nationally and regionally?

► What are the main projects, activities, events, initiatives, resources and so forth that contribute to youth work development on a national / regional level?

► How do national level developments relate to European and regional developments?

► What are the main gaps and challenges connected to youth work development?

► What opportunities could further support its development in relation to the eight thematic areas of the Agenda?

The mapping results will help decision makers and other relevant stakeholders obtain a clearer picture of the current state of youth work, identify specific measures to strengthen interaction between stakeholders and initiate measures to foster youth work development in a country. Once completed, the final report can be used to plan future work and be used as an advocacy tool for different stakeholders.

19. CM/Rec(2017)4 on Youth Work and the explanatory memorandum, available at https://rm.coe.int/cmrec-2017-4-and-explanatory-memorandum-youth-work-web/16808ff0d1, accessed 28 December 2023.
20. Council of the European Union (2024): Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on youth work policy in an empowering Europe. *C/2024/3526, available at* https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A42024Y03526&qid=1735391478418*; accessed 28 December 2024.*

The report should not be written or perceived of as a "success story report", but as a realistic picture of what is happening in the field and what measures are needed to take things further. As such, the report can serve its dual purpose: to map the current state of youth work and to provide guidance on how to continue in the future.

2.2. The mapping process

The first step in the process of mapping youth work ecosystems should be establishing a plan. This includes reaching main stakeholder agreement on its purpose, scope and focus, before launching the actual mapping process, including collecting data and analysis. Once the mapping is finished, its results can be used to further develop youth work politically and in practice.
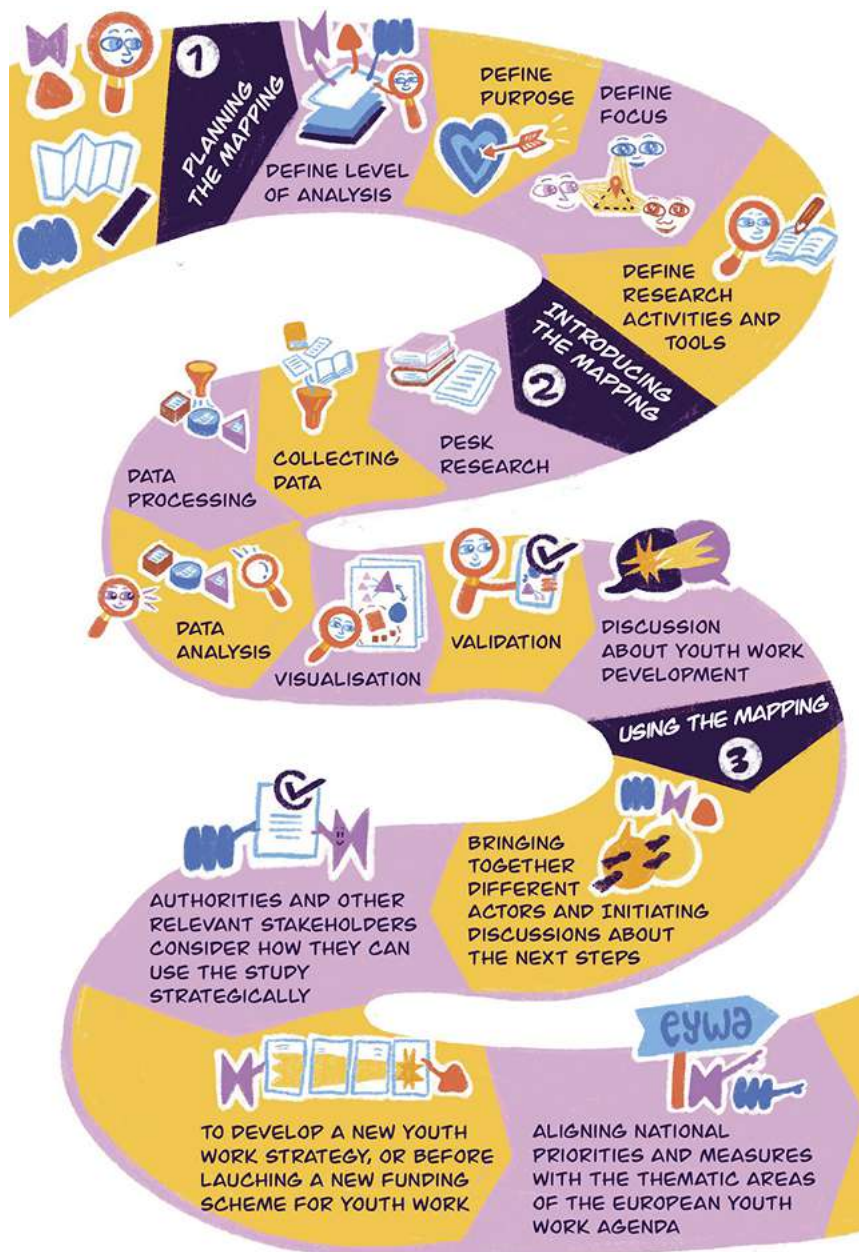

Figure 6: The mapping process

2.2.1. Planning the mapping

The process should start by defining the study's purpose, scope and focus. This includes planning research activities and developing appropriate data collection instruments. The methodology described here will provide a general overview of what national mapping could look like. However, there is no one-size-fits-all and its exact form will depend on the situation of youth work in the country and its existing needs. Consequently, the format, activities, instruments and other aspects of the mapping will differ from one country to another, and will need to be defined jointly by the study's commissioning organisation and the researchers conducting it. When planning the mapping, the national stakeholders should be entrusted with the tasks discussed below.

Define the level of analysis. While this methodology generally refers to national and country level mapping, we recommend that the study be conducted on the level where decisions in youth work are made. This could mean different things in different contexts, ranging from national to regional to local level. It could also mean the involvement of two or more levels at the same time. The level of decision making is important because the recommendations that will emerge from the study should be applicable to youth work development in a given context. Namely, stakeholders should follow-up on recommendations and guidelines, and use them to introduce changes and to lobby for new initiatives. In deciding which stakeholders should be part of the planning process, both the country's political organisation should be taken into account as well as the main stakeholders in the youth work field. This could include for example government officials of different administrative levels (political organisation) as well as youth organisations and youth workers organisations (stakeholders).

Define the purpose. As elaborated above, national mapping has a dual purpose: to describe the current state of youth work and to provide guidelines for its further development. However, it could arise that one of the goals carries more weight than the other in a given context. This could be the case, for example, if a national youth work ecosystem has already been analysed and the results published in a nationally recognised document. Hence, before launching the mapping process, the national stakeholders should pay particular attention to the study's aim, how they stand to gain from it and set clear objectives to be achieved.

Define the focus. The focus of a study is closely related to the available resources. A national study may focus on more than one topic, like priority areas, expectations, etc., being mapped. Advised by researchers and stakeholders, it should be the decision of the organisers of the study to decide on its focus. If they commit to according the same level of attention to all aspects of the study, then adequate time and resources should be allocated. It should be clear that the more that is expected from the study, the more difficult it will be to achieve and the more resourceful mapping will have to be. Furthermore, there should be a certain openness towards a shift of focus during the mapping process. As the example of the European study shows, data collection may provide information on a topic not originally to be thought much relevant, whereas the original question could not be analysed in depth. This led to a shift from mapping measures and activities to mapping expectations and relationships.

This also holds true when it comes to the expected outcomes of the study. Namely, it should be decided whether the study will focus on the challenges, gaps, opportunities, etc. Hence, a differentiation must be made between the factual elements which can be listed (which stakeholders, which measures, which topics, bodies, etc.) and information that can be used to further develop the field (challenges and opportunities, etc.). If the focus is on both, they should be aligned together and with the purpose of the study.

Define the research activities and tools. The scope and form of activities should be planned according to the specific nature of the mapping. The present methodology includes a variety of methods to choose from, but the exact type and number of activities to be implemented should be decided by the national stakeholders. What is presented here is a kind of "menu" to choose from. According to what is chosen, appropriate data collection tools need to be created, such as questionnaires and questions for the focus groups and interviews.

2.2.2. Conducting the mapping

Following the planning phase, and once the level, purpose and focus have been defined, the commissioning organisation and the researchers can launch activities relevant to collecting the data needed to answer the research questions. We propose a combination of desk and field research activities.

2.2.2.1. Desk research

During this step, the researchers need to identify and study existing literature on youth work in the country, such as policy documents (laws, bylaws, strategies), conducted studies, reports, articles and so forth. If there is a national working group involved with the European Youth Work Agenda, it would be very useful to include their meeting and activity reports. Other useful items would be a list of youth-work projects in the country funded by the national authorities or European programmes, such as a national agency for Erasmus+. The Youth Wiki page on youth work[21] and the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy´s information pages on youth work[22] may provide a useful, albeit general, source of information.

However, to obtain an accurate picture of a specific country's youth work ecosystems, focusing on those already conducting European and international activities will not be enough. Publications by relevant youth work stakeholders such as national youth councils, youth organisations and youth work organisations can provide additional information and a more in-depth view on country-specific youth work.

The purpose of desk research is two-fold. First, studying existing documents will help researchers gain a better understanding of the reality (or different realities) of the youth work field. Second, desk research will enable researchers to compile a list of stakeholders to involve in the research activities. In the European study, the starting point for researchers were the members of the Steering Group for the European

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21. Available at https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/policy-fields/10-youth-work, accessed 28 December 2024.
22. Available at https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/countries, accessed 28 December 2024.

Youth Work Agenda, established by the EU-Council of Europe Partnership in the field of youth. At European level, they are considered to be the leading experts in the field. If a similar stakeholder group exists on a national level, this could be a good place to start, keeping in mind the importance of covering as many different kinds of stakeholders as possible, such as authorities and ministries, youth (work) organisations, youth worker organisations, organisations offering youth work (churches, social organisations, etc.), research bodies and universities, NGOs, to name but a few. The definition of the community of practice (see section 1.1.) may help to identify additional groups of stakeholders.

2.2.2.2. Collecting the data

As previously mentioned, one of the tasks of desk research should be to compile a list of experienced stakeholders in the field. The next stage is to involve them in data collection. During this phase of the mapping study, the task of the researchers is to collect as much information as possible that could serve as a basis for creating a description and visualisation map of the national youth work ecosystem. Based on the experience gained from the European study, we propose different approaches to collecting data. The type, scope and number of research activities that are being organised depends on the national context and the available resources. We advise, however, using a combination of the data-collection tools discussed below.

Figure 7: Data collection methods

Expert interviews. Interviews are in-depth conversations with individuals who have good insight into youth work development, such as: representatives of national ministries and other governmental bodies responsible for youth (work); representatives of national youth workers associations and national youth councils; large youth (work) organisations; and youth work trainers, researchers and educators. The interviews should help researchers gain a better understanding the state of the youth work field. Who are the main stakeholders and how do they relate to one another? What projects and initiatives are currently being carried out? What developments are underway? What are the current gaps, challenges and potential opportunities to be dealt with? The interviews can also help identify relevant stakeholders that were missed in the initial desk research, and who could be involved in the research activities to follow.

The interview questions will depend on the purpose and focus of the mapping study. For example, if the main goal is to identify gaps and potential areas relevant to further development of youth work, then most of the questions should be directed towards these issues. If only one or but a few of the thematic priority areas of the Agenda are addressed, then less questions should be asked on this subject.

Conducting interviews can provide researchers with valuable information that is crucial to accurately visualising the ecosystem mapping. But this demands much time and considerable resources, and while interviews may work well in smaller countries or where the youth work is underdeveloped, this approach might be challenging in bigger countries with many active stakeholders. In such cases, we propose a combined approach, where a few interviews are conducted with key people, and the rest of the stakeholders are involved in focus groups or surveys.

Focus groups. Focus groups are basically facilitated group conversations with individuals that are experienced and knowledgeable experts on a subject. For the discussion, the same set of questions used in the interviews can be used to make comparison possible. However, you may consider using different questions if the interviews have already provided a good overview of the subject, and if the focus groups are concentrating only on certain aspects of the mapping study, such as the relations between different stakeholders.

There may also be a need of developing different questions if each focus group is composed of different stakeholders (for example, one focus group composed of government representatives, another with youth work practitioners), or if different focus groups are concentrating on different thematic areas of the Agenda.

Ideally, the groups should include between five and eight participants. Their number and profile depend on the outcomes of the desk research. Think of how the focus groups could be used to investigate different topics and obtain different perspectives, which could contribute to visualising the youth work ecosystem. The organisation of focus groups can also be inserted into activities already planned, such as seminars, conferences or other events. Sometimes it may be easier to include a discussion session on the youth work ecosystem in an already planned activity rather than organising a stand-alone event. Additionally, the groups can take the form of workshops with more participants. These could be divided between plenary or small-group discussions (or both), organised around stakeholders and other topics.

Questionnaires (surveys). If surveys are to be used in the study, we suggest sending them out after the interviews and focus groups have taken place. Thus, the list of stakeholders complied from the previous data collection methods can be included. The benefit of using questionnaires is that they help gather a lot of information from many different sources, and they are particularly useful if a lot of stakeholders need to be involved in the mapping exercise.

While interviews and focus groups yield information about participants in the ecosystem, such as their degree of involvement, their relations with others and each other, surveys work well for mapping "who is doing what". Hence, using an online can query respondents about the projects, initiatives and policies they are involved in, as well as how they co-operate with others. We advise using a survey if one of the study's goals is to create a comprehensive list of projects relative to youth work development. For data processing purposes, we recommended using an online survey program.

2.2.2.3. Processing the data

Because of the large amount and variety of data that can be collected through the proposed research activities, we recommend using a spreadsheet, where all responses can be processed, grouped and stored. The European study used MAXQDA® to process the interview data, but this can also be done using a spreadsheet. For this purpose, in the European study a list of main categories was created based on the interview questions. The interview sequences (paragraphs, sentences or partial sentences) were then systematically assigned to the main categories, such as understanding the European Youth Agenda, expectations towards stakeholders and roles of stakeholders. During this coding process, new sub-categories were created, such as expectations towards the European Commission, the Council of Europe, national governments and youth worker organisations. The interview sequences in the main and sub-categories were then summarised. The summaries provided an initial overview of the most important topics of the mapping. Although this method of data processing is time-consuming, we recommend a similar way of processing data of national mappings. It helps to maintain an overview of the variety of data, statements and descriptions during the subsequent analysis. This form of data processing can also be used for focus groups and may even help to categorise open survey questions.

The data gathered from the questionnaire can be processed in parallel to the qualitative data. Depending on which program has been used, the data can be entered, or exported to a spreadsheet. A distinction must be made here between standardised data, listed data and open-question data. Standardised data can be processed relatively easily and visualised in a diagram. Listed data, such as which projects have been organised by stakeholders, must be cleansed of duplicates and then grouped. Finally, the answers from open questions should be coded and summarised, similar to the procedure for interview data.

2.2.2.4. Analysing the data

The ecosystem can now be analysed using the summaries of the subcategories. The focus here is on categories that cannot be represented by tables, diagrams and simple overviews. The analysis may well reveal a few surprises regarding the ecosystem, aim of the study or the expected results.

Figure 8: Mapping outcomes surprise box

For example, the original aim of the European study was to obtain an overview of stakeholders and their projects related to the eight priority areas of the Agenda. But in the course of the study, it became apparent that the data provided relatively little information on this subject, showing instead a much stronger focus on mutual expectations. We therefore recommend comparing the information from the desk research as a frame of reference and carrying out a validation process (see below). It is also worth taking a look at the original data from time to time to make sure that contexts, connections and so forth have actually been taken into account.

One of the final outcomes of the study could be a spreadsheet listing all the stakeholders, their projects, resources invested, their partners and so forth. We reiterate that the exact categories of data will depend on the nature of the study. For example, if the aim is to map what is happening in each of the thematic areas of the Agenda, then this subject could be one of the columns in the spreadsheet, which can be used to map who is active and in which area.

2.2.2.5. Visualising the youth work ecosystem

Once the data has been analysed, visualising the results can begin. Its aim is to present them in a simplified and clear manner. Ideally, one should be able to visualise the youth work ecosystem of a country in one glance.

When mapping the ecosystem, it is helpful to start with the key stakeholders and position them according to the information collected up to that point. Their position

on the map should be in accordance with how close to the centre of youth work activities they are perceived to be and how closely they work together. All types of relations between different stakeholders, as well as gaps in their collaboration can be visualised.

In mapping an ecosystem, the researchers' basic task is to visualise the information received from the different stakeholders in a way that shows how the ecosystem looks according to the respondents. A crucial aspect of the visualisation process is to map the factual information received and ensure that it does not include interpretations of what people have said, and even less, of researchers' own ideas. Visualising should show how the ecosystem currently looks, and not how it should look ideally. If the latter is an important aspect of the mapping study, two separate visualisations could be created, one depicting the current situation and the other the ideal ecosystem. Such an approach followed in the European study.

Since the map is based on the views of different stakeholders, different perspectives on the same issues can occur. In this case, the researchers will have to reconcile differing views into a single map, image or illustration. If this proves impossible, then a text explaining that one or several stakeholders had opposing views of the given situation should accompany the visualisation map. Opposing opinions are good things to have, as they can be addressed and rediscussed in the validation process.

How the ecosystem is visualised will vary from one case to another. The information can be aggregated on one large map, listing all stakeholders and projects, but the outcomes can also be shown using different maps for different sectors (government, civil society, etc.), different parts of the country, or different thematic areas of the Agenda, to name but a few of the possibilities.

2.2.2.6. Validating the study

In the validation phase of the study, the outcomes of the analysis and visualisation should be discussed with the stakeholders that have contributed data. There are three corresponding tasks that fall under the scope of the validation process. The first is to identify additional stakeholders, projects and other elements that were previously missed. In all probability, new information will emerge when the same respondents are asked to comment on a visual representation of the findings. The second is to ensure that the researchers have correctly understood, interpreted and presented the information. The third is to prompt stakeholders to rethink the existing ecosystem and, if necessary, consider measures to develop it further (on this point, see section 2.2.3.). These different tasks can be carried out in parallel to each other and the visualisation process.

Figure 9: Three corresponding tasks in the validation process

To validate the information on stakeholders and projects collected in a spreadsheet, we recommend using a variation of the Delphi method, a tool for building consensus.[23] It can be applied by sending the spreadsheet to all that are listed as having been involved in the research activities and ask them to provide any additional information on their organisation with regard to measures, topics or other organisations it is engaged with and to indicate additional organisations they feel should be added to the spreadsheet.

They can add the information directly in the spreadsheet or can be asked to add information via email or a new questionnaire. In that case, the researchers need to collect all answers and update the spreadsheet accordingly.

The next step in the validation process is to send the spreadsheet (or questionnaire) to any newly added organisations and to those which did not respond the first time around. The same questions should be asked and the spreadsheet updated accordingly. This process should be repeated until there are no new organisations or projects to be added.

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23. For more information see Grime M. M. and Wright G (2016): "Delphi method", in Wiley StatsRef: Statistics Reference Online, available at https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118445112.stat07879, accessed 28 December 2024. and Geist M. R. (2010): "Using the Delphi method to engage stakeholders – A comparison of two studies", in *Evaluation and program planning* 33:2, pp. 147-54, available at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2009.06.006, accessed 28 December 2024.

Figure 10: The Delphi method

To validate the visualisation of the ecosystem, we recommend discussing the outcomes of the mapping with a group of stakeholders for feedback on how those involved in youth work have been positioned in relation to the centre of youth work activities. This could be done in focus groups organised specifically for this purpose, or as part of other activities already planned, such as a conference workshop. Preferably the visualisation maps should be presented to various groups of stakeholders on different occasions, in order to gain different perspectives. When providing their feedback, the stakeholders should be asked to discuss how stakeholders in the field co-operate

and interact with each other. This should indicate if any modifications are needed to give a more realistic picture of youth work in a given country.

They should also review the needs, gaps, challenges, opportunities and / or other aspects relevant to the study's purpose. These elements may not necessarily be visible on the map but the visualisation may serve as an inspiration for the researchers to discuss relevant aspects of the mapping with the stakeholders. The focus of this step will largely depend on the initial purpose. The collected feedback can be integrated in the analysis and the visualisation map, or it can be included in the study's final report.

2.2.2.7. The final report

The study should end with a final report that includes the main findings, conclusions and recommendations, as well as a description of the study's purpose, methodology and activities. It should also present the compiled spreadsheet and the visualised ecosystem(s). To ensure that the results will be correctly interpreted, an introductory description of the European Youth Work Agenda as a context as well as the meaning of youth work development in the country is helpful. Doing this would provide enough background information on the ecosystems to enable laypersons to correctly interpret the visualisation maps.

Depending on the timeline of the presentation of the findings and the publication of the final report, the main outcomes of the discussions on youth work development, organised as a final step in the process (section 2.2.3.) may be incorporated into the report. The conclusions of the discussion and in particular any steps and measures agreed upon, can serve as guidelines for further youth work development.
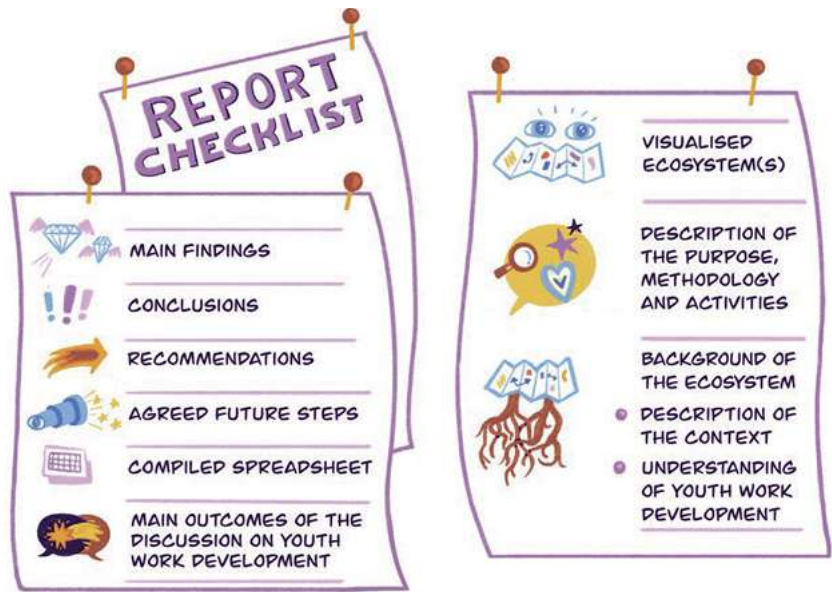

Figure 11: Final report content checklist

2.2.3. Using the mapping results

Mapping national youth work ecosystems is an exercise that can help stakeholders move youth work forward on a national, regional or local level. The results, as well as the process itself, can contribute to bringing together different stakeholders and initiating discussions about what needs to be done next. From this standpoint, the visualisation maps and spreadsheet listing stakeholders and projects do more that produce an overview, they also lay the groundwork for future planning.

One of the main purposes of the mapping study is therefore to prompt discussion on what should be done next to further develop youth work. While conducting a national mapping study is of great value in itself, authorities and other relevant players should consider how the study can be used to devise strategies. For example, it would be a particularly useful tool in developing new youth work policies or youth-funding schemes. Conducting this kind of study is also an effective way to overcome barriers, establish new partnerships and align policy with practice. Hence, when planning the mapping process, much thought should be given to how the study could be used once completed.

In light of current European developments in youth work, the mapping study can also be used to align national priorities and measures with the priority thematic areas of the European Youth Work Agenda. Even if these areas are not tackled directly, mapping national ecosystems contributes to the Agenda by serving as a framework for strengthening national youth work.

Thus, after data are collected, processed, analysed, visualised and validated, and a report is written, we recommend organising an event towards this end. The event could be a seminar, conference or a different kind of activity, but one where the main stakeholders are gathered in one place. They should include those who conduct youth work or represent those who do, such as national youth councils, youth organisations or youth-work organisations. Ideally, the seminar should be set up by the study's commissioning organisation and include all those involved in the study, as well as others that have been mapped as relevant players in the field.

The study's findings should be presented at the event, and include the visualisation of the ecosystem, the information on organisations and projects gathered in the spreadsheet, and the conclusions drawn from the analysis, plus any additional information collected during the validation phase. The presentation should be followed by an open discussion about the next steps to be taken, or how to move forward in youth work development. The purpose here is not to collect additional feedback or revalidate the findings, but to start planning the future, based on the study's findings.

2.3. A European outlook

The methodology for a national mapping of the youth work ecosystems provides exciting prospects on the European level as well. As we discussed in the introduction, the European study was limited to stakeholders and initiatives on a European level. But we know little about developments in individual European countries, especially in the form of actual studies. If more European countries were to conduct national mappings, this would provide us with best practices, encourage peer learning, and possibly lead to a pan-European exercise.
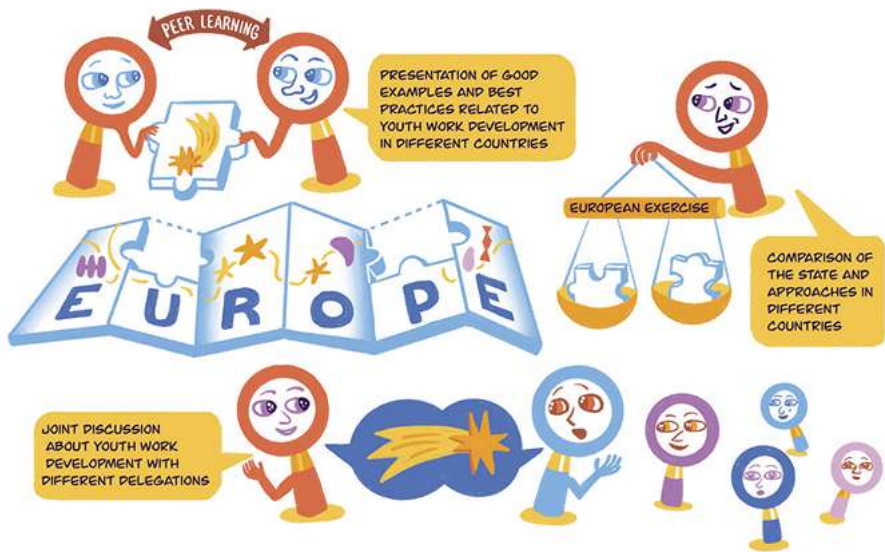
Figure 12: A pan-European exercise

Best practices. Presenting best practices on youth work development in different countries would enable national actors to demonstrate the unique ways in which stakeholders work and co-operate, using a standardised methodological approach.

Peer learning. The studies would also provide national governments and other stakeholders with an opportunity to learn from one another. This is especially true for countries that share a similar context, background, political organisation, or in which youth development is in a similar place. Studying the situation of youth work in other countries and their good practices could provide new ideas and inspiration. The experiences in other ecosystems could thus be used by stakeholders when discussing the future of national, regional or local youth work.

A pan-European exercise. Given enough interest and resources, national mapping studies could be conducted simultaneously across different countries. Such a pan-European exercise would offer valuable knowledge on needs, challenges and chances of youth work in Europe. The selection of countries could be based on a countries´ interest in conducting a mapping. For a systematic approach and analysis, it would be helpful to select countries according to methods of similarity, for example similar socio-political characteristics, or according to methods of difference, for example different youth work practice architectures.[24] The in-depth information resulting from such a comparing analysis across countries and systems would provide systematic evidence on the development of youth work structures in Europe, which could also be used to plan future European policy documents.

Joint discussions on youth work development. If national mappings were conducted in different countries, joint discussions with delegations of the key stakeholder groups from the participating countries could follow. This would enable representatives from

24. Kiilakoski T. (2018) "Diversity of practice architectures on education and career paths for youth workers in Europe", Council of Europe Publishing, available at https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262400/Kiilakoski-final/525aef72-4871-1855-8fb2-72f2b7824d74, accessed 28 December 2024.

across Europe to discuss youth work challenges and opportunities together, after due reflection on their national realities, using the same methodological approach and even upon exchanging visualisations of the state of youth work in their countries.

Conclusion

The methodology for mapping national ecosystems presented here is first an attempt to respond to the expressed interest in national mappings that followed the initial presentation of the results of the "Mapping study on European youth work ecosystems". Second, it endeavours to systematically process and describe, in the context of national realities, the many methodological considerations, limitations and discussions that took place in the background of the European study and which did not find their way into publication.

In this way, the authors hope to make a small contribution to evidence- and knowledge-based development of youth work policy in the framework of the European Youth Work Agenda.

About the authors

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

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In recent years, the Council of Europe and the European Commission have decided to enhance their cooperation on youth work. The Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work, the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (2020), and the consequent European Union Council Resolution on the European Youth Work Agenda (EYWA) in 2020 were key milestones in this direction. In line with these developments, in 2022–23, the Youth Partnership stepped up its activities on youth work and on the implementation of the EYWA, among others, by conducting research on European youth work eco-systems. The aim of the publication "Growing youth work in Europe. Results of the mapping study 'Mapping European Youth Work'" (2025) was to depict the diversity of actors and their initiatives, with special respect to the implementation of the EYWA, by providing a systematic overview of actors and contents. However, the research was limited to what is known as the European youth work ecosystem.

The current publication is meant to complement the European mapping study by presenting the methodology of conducting a mapping at the national or sub-national level. By doing so, it hopes to encourage and provide methodological support for future initiatives aimed at systematically discovering the current state of youth work, and point out its gaps and potential for implementing the EYWA on national, regional and local levels.

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