



Shaping the the future

Policy Paper

**Strengthening Youth Organisations: A Call for
Sustainable Support and Recognition**

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Introduction

Small NGOs and youth organisations are at the vanguard of social change, providing essential services and opportunities to vulnerable communities. Youth organisations, in particular, serve as key spaces for empowering young people, addressing social inequalities and fostering a sense of solidarity. In the words of the European Commission, "non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become essential actors in the employment and social field, especially in the fight against poverty, social exclusion and discrimination".

However, these organisations often face significant challenges that jeopardise their stability, ranging from financial uncertainty to volunteer burnout and organisational crises.

Throughout this policy paper, we refer to youth organisations as an umbrella term that includes NGOs, INGOs (International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations), and CSOs (Civil Society Organisations). Although they differ in their national registration models and operational capacities, they share a common purpose: they are created to serve young people, are youth-led, democratic, non-governmental, and not-for-profit.

The project **Shaping the Future: Strengthening Resilience in Youth NGOs** was organised by the International Falcon Movement – Socialist Education International (IFM-SEI), an umbrella organisation focused on non-formal education that empowers children and young people to become active citizens and defend their human rights. Rooted in values of socialism, equality and solidarity, it is a global network for youth organisations committed to social justice and participatory democracy. This project was implemented with the support of the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe. Its main objective was to equip youth workers with the skills and knowledge needed to manage internal crises, build stronger organisational structures and ensure the long-term survival of their NGOs.

The main activity was a 6-day training workshop that took place from 24th February to 2nd March 2025 in Germany, bringing together 20 participants from youth organisations across 10 countries: Austria, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Mali, Peru, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, Zimbabwe and Palestine/Israel (Arab-Israeli NGO). The workshop provided youth workers with in-depth knowledge and practical tools for crisis management as well as building resilient structures in a shrinking civic space. Using non-formal education methods, the training created a space for youth workers to exchange experiences, discuss the challenges they face within their organisations, strengthen their capacities to address them, and reflect on common issues affecting youth organisations globally.

As a final outcome of the project, participants developed two outputs: a podcast series that you can find [here](#), and this Policy Paper.

The purpose of this policy paper is to draw the attention of decision-makers and stakeholders to the need to support and collaborate with youth organisations to achieve positive and global change. Among these difficulties, we discuss lack of funding, crisis management, burnout, and volunteering.



Context & Importance

Youth organisations across Europe face mounting challenges that threaten their very existence. While they remain essential for empowering young people and strengthening democracy, they operate in an increasingly difficult environment.

Financial sustainability is the most pressing threat. According to the report published by the University of Manchester Global Development Institute, "To die a good death: the story of NGO closures" , two-thirds of the organisations examined cited financial difficulties as the reason for their closure. What makes this particularly concerning is that in 13 out of 14 cases, NGOs faced dissolution after losing a single source of funding. This demonstrates the dangerous vulnerability that comes from relying on limited funding sources.

This is not an isolated problem. The Council of Europe's 2024 study on key trends in youth participation identified that youth organisations face "funding restrictions, disproportionate reporting requirements, bureaucratic obstacles linked to other administrative regulations alongside what has been termed the "shrinking of civic space." The European Youth Forum's Strategic Plan 2024-2028 reinforces this concern, stating that short-term, project-based funding "hinder youth organisations from consistent and self-determined work." It emphasises that "sustainable institutional funding opportunities adapted to the needs and realities of youth organisations are key" and that access to such funding would "decrease the organisation's vulnerabilities and dependencies and, therefore, boost the impact of youth organisations' work.

The scale of the gap between funding needs and available support becomes evident when examining current resources. The European Youth Foundation, which supports youth organisations across the Council of Europe's 46 member states, provides grants to around 200 youth projects annually with a budget of approximately 4 million euros. While valuable, this level of support cannot meet the needs of the estimated 950 organisations registered as partners, let alone the thousands of local and national youth organisations operating across Europe.

Interconnected to financial challenges, some youth organisations struggle with internal conflict, defined by Therese Nguyen (2023) as the disagreement or discord among individuals or groups within an organisation. In her article "Internal Conflict in Nonprofits: Unravelling the Root Causes", Nguyen argues that non-profits are one of the main sectors where disagreements are most likely to emerge. The article points out that mission-driven work in NGOs is often emotionally charged, as people invest their time, energy and personal beliefs in the cause.

This emotional investment can become a breeding ground for high levels of stress, internal conflict and ultimately burnout. The consequences are serious: staff burnout and internal conflicts can lead to high turnover rates. When experienced staff or volunteers leave, they take with them valuable knowledge and skills, leaving new members to learn independently without proper support. This interrupts the flow of knowledge that would have otherwise been passed on from more experienced staff members within the organisation, to less experienced staff members.

The "Shaping the Future: Strengthening Resilience in Youth NGOs" project addressed these challenges providing youth workers with knowledge and tools for crisis management and organisational resilient structures, using non-formal education methodologies. One of the non-formal education methodologies used was an adapted version of the problem-solution tree method, where participants first identified core issues within their organisations, then mapped out causes and consequences of these issues, and finally transformed the problems into concrete recommendations for action. Using the problem-solution tree method, it was clear that most problems within the youth NGO sector are interconnected to or result from lack of funding.

The problems youth organisations face can be understood across four interconnected areas:

1. Lack of funding

Many NGOs rely heavily on public funding sources, such as European Union and Council of Europe grants and programmes. While essential, this funding is often volatile and subject to political and economic changes. It is often short-term and project-based, preventing organisations from investing in structural development or staff retention. Complex application processes, strict reporting requirements, co-funding mandates and language barriers make this funding difficult to access, particularly for smaller organisations. Many youth organisations also lack diversity in their funding sources, relying on just a few funders or even a single source of income, making them extremely vulnerable.

2. Crisis management

Internal conflicts may arise from various sources such as financial instability, burnout, and differing perspectives. Without effective conflict resolution mechanisms, these disputes can create difficult working environments.

3. Burnout

Workers and volunteers in youth organisations often face high workloads, emotional strain from mission-driven work and under-resourced environments where they are stretched beyond sustainable limits – affecting not just individual wellbeing but also organisational continuity and effectiveness. When organisations cannot afford adequate staffing levels or proper support structures, the burden falls on the few individuals trying to keep operations running, inevitably leading to burnout.

4. Volunteer challenges

Recruiting and retaining volunteers has become increasingly difficult, especially since COVID-19. In addition, volunteering today requires new skills – such as having to apply for complex grants and managing project finances. Without adequate training and support structures, this complexity creates barriers and can make it difficult to keep volunteers.



1. Lack of Funding

Governmental and institutional support is essential for NGOs to function effectively, yet access to such support has become increasingly limited in recent years. As the Council of Europe states: “Youth organisations and associations are confronted with reduced funding, resulting in declining opportunities for young people’s active involvement in civil society.” The European Youth Forum’s 2024 motion on the situation of youth organisations across Europe highlights that ‘political and economic circumstances are leading to shrinking civic spaces’. It further notes that youth organisations face an ‘increasingly challenging situation’ as funding becomes harder to secure.

As funding from both governments and institutions becomes more constrained, organisations find themselves competing against each other for the same limited pool of grants. This creates a difficult environment where organisations must invest significant time and resources into writing competitive project proposals, often for funding that may only support short-term activities rather than core operational costs. This competition particularly disadvantages smaller NGOs and volunteer-run organisations that lack dedicated staff to write applications and manage complex reporting requirements.

While institutions such as the European Union and the Council of Europe provide some funding for youth organisations, the predominance of short-term project-based funding creates structural instability. This widespread reliance on short-term project funding rather than institutional core funding prevents organisations from working consistently and independently. Moreover, governments and institutions often reallocate resources based on shifting political priorities or budget constraints and may place restrictions on the types of projects they will fund. This leaves organisations constantly searching for their next source of income rather than being able to focus on their mission and the young people they serve.

Many youth NGOs also face a lack of diversity in their funding sources, relying on just a few funders or even a single source of income. This makes them extremely vulnerable to changes in funding priorities or the loss of a key funder, as demonstrated by the research showing that organisations often face closure after losing a single funding source.

2. Crisis Management

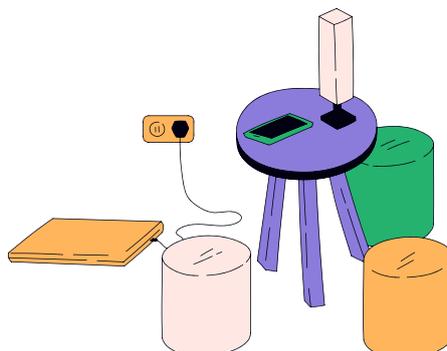
Crises are inevitable, particularly for small NGOs that often lack the resources, structures and capacity to respond effectively. Youth organisations face crises for a variety of interconnected reasons, many of which stem from internal organisational challenges as well as external pressures.

Internally, many NGOs lack solid governance structures or established procedures for conflict resolution and crisis response. When disagreements arise – whether related to finances, workload, responsibilities or differing organisational visions – organisations without clear decision-making processes or conflict-management mechanisms can struggle to address issues early. Without defined roles, transparent communication channels or agreed protocols for problem-solving, minor disagreements can quickly escalate into organisational crisis.

External factors can exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Institutional requirements can be especially difficult for smaller NGOs to meet. Co-funding mandates, for example, require organisations to advance their own financial resources upfront, which many smaller organisations simply don't have. In addition, the language used in calls for proposals and grant guidelines is often technical, creating accessibility barriers.

Application and evaluation processes introduce another layer of complexity. They are typically long, highly bureaucratic and resource-intensive. Organisations may spend a lot of time preparing proposals yet receive little to no constructive feedback when applications are unsuccessful. Without clear feedback, NGOs struggle to adjust their approaches for future applications, creating a cycle of repeated effort with little learning. This process creates stress, uncertainty and administrative burden that can overwhelm already stretched organisations.

A lack of crisis-management training also contributes to organisational vulnerability. Many youth workers and volunteers are deeply committed to their missions but have limited access to structured training in mediation, conflict de-escalation, financial risk assessment or organisational resilience. When crises occur - internal tensions, sudden loss of funding, key staff departures - organisations often rely on ad-hoc responses rather than prepared strategies.



3. Burnout

Burnout is a widespread challenge among workers and volunteers in youth NGOs. While non-governmental organisations play a crucial role in addressing social issues and supporting communities, the people behind this work often operate under intense pressure and limited resources, making them particularly vulnerable to emotional and physical exhaustion.

Burnout is generally defined as a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress. It occurs when employees or volunteers feel overwhelmed, undervalued or unable to meet the demands placed upon them. In youth organisations - where resources are often scarce and workloads are high - burnout is often a recurrent and structural issue rather than an individual failing.

The causes of burnout are often interconnected. Many workers and volunteers are required to take on multiple roles simultaneously, ranging from facilitating activities to writing grant applications, managing logistics and leading projects. As highlighted in the Lack of Funding section, under-resourced environments mean that the burden of maintaining day-to-day operations often falls on a small group of people. This is not sustainable and can quickly lead to burnout.

Beyond workload, the nature of value-driven work brings its own emotional weight. Working on social or environmental topics, responding to crises, or operating in high-risk contexts such as conflict-affected regions, adds an additional layer of stress. And this can intensify burnout when not accompanied by adequate support structures.

Low or absent salaries, in the case of unpaid volunteers, combined with a lack of formal recognition for their efforts, contribute to feelings of underappreciation. Over time, this can damage morale and increase the risk of burnout, particularly for long-term volunteers who balance organisational responsibilities with personal or professional commitments.

The impact of burnout can have serious consequences, not just for the individuals affected, but also for the organisation. It can lead to decreased productivity - overworked staff become less efficient, increased turnover - high burnout rates often lead to more people leaving the organisation, and lower morale - a stressful work environment can lead to a toxic culture, affecting everyone's wellbeing.

At the organisational level, some measures can help prevent burnout and promote balance:

- Regularly **recognise** and **appreciate volunteers' efforts** through formal and informal mechanisms.

- Offer **flexible schedules** that respect personal and professional commitments.
- Ensure volunteers and staff have **access to breaks, holidays and recovery time**.
- Provide training on emotional **resilience, stress management and crisis response**.

4. Volunteering Challenges

Recruiting and retaining volunteers, especially young people, has become increasingly difficult in recent years, especially since COVID-19. Moreover, volunteering today requires a whole new set of skills - volunteers in youth organisations and NGOs are often required to prepare and run events and workshops, apply for complex project grants, manage budgets and even report expenses. This level of responsibility and the technical skills required - from facilitation to financial management and grant writing - represents a significant barrier to entry for many potential volunteers and makes it difficult to balance volunteering with other commitments.

The shortage of volunteers also affects the ability of NGOs to effectively deliver programmes and services. Without a steady stream of committed volunteers, many organisations struggle to maintain their operations and fulfil their missions.

In addition, volunteer work is not recognised as a valuable contribution due to its unpaid nature. This can strain personal relationships and place additional pressure on individuals who are giving their time and energy without getting paid or receiving formal acknowledgement or reward.

For some organisations, finding volunteers is particularly challenging because young people in certain countries perceive these organisations as political, which discourages them from getting involved.

Policy recommendations

To address the challenges outlined above and ensure the long-term sustainability of youth organisations, we call on European institutions, national governments and funding bodies to implement the following measures:

1

1. Increase structural funding

Youth organisations need structural funding that is sufficient, fairly calculated and adapted to the realities of NGOs. This means moving away from dependence on short-term project grants and ensuring that structural support covers core organisational needs, including adequate staffing to avoid excessive workloads and long-term exhaustion. Funding rules must reflect how NGOs actually operate, so that organisations can maintain stable teams, plan ahead and remain resilient without being forced into continuous project-based survival. We, therefore, call on European institutions and national authorities to expand structural funding schemes that prioritise sustainability and stability.

2

2. Simplify application and reporting processes

The current complexity of grant applications and reporting requirements creates unnecessary barriers, particularly for smaller organisations. Application procedures should be simplified and made more intuitive, with clear criteria and accessible language. As highlighted in the Council of Europe's study on youth participation, the complexity and redundancy of current procedures discourage organisations from even applying.

We recommend developing a universal, standardised reporting template that can be used across different funding programmes, making it quicker and easier for organisations to report on their activities.

3

3. Reduce or eliminate co-funding requirements

Co-funding requirements disproportionately benefit larger, financially stable organisations. Smaller organisations – especially those representing marginalised communities – often lack the financial reserves needed to pre-finance activities or match funds. We therefore call for a reduction of co-funding obligations in institutional funding schemes and, when possible, full funding of projects to ensure equal access regardless of an organisation's financial size or capacity.

4

4. Mainstream lump-sum mechanisms within project budgets

Current financial reporting requirements often oblige organisations to justify every expense creating a disproportionate administrative burden – especially for smaller NGOs. Lump-sum mechanisms, already used in some programmes, offer a simpler approach to receive a fixed amount for defined activities and by focusing on the achievement of the objectives rather than on exhaustive financial documentation. It also incentivises cost-effectiveness, as organisations can retain savings achieved through smart budgeting. We, therefore, call for funding bodies to mainstream lump-sum budget models across programmes.

5

5. Reduce the number of payment instalments

Receiving project funding in multiple instalments creates unnecessary financial strain for youth organisations, which often operate with limited liquidity. When payments are divided in fragmented instalments spread across the project, organisations may struggle to cover upfront costs, manage cash flow or begin activities on schedule. Funding models that provide larger initial payments – such as the 80% pre-financing used in KA1 project managed by the National Agency – illustrate how reducing the number of instalments would ease administrative and financial pressures.

6

6. Allow NGOs to diversify income generation

Youth organisations sometimes seek to diversify their sources of income through activities such as consultancy services, training provision or expertise-based work. These initiatives aim to strengthen financial independence and reduce reliance on institutional grants. However, current tax and reporting frameworks often treat these activities as commercial operations, subjecting NGOs to additional VAT obligations and administrative procedures that can be disproportionate in relation to the income generated. This discourages organisations from exploring alternative revenue, even when all profits are reinvested into essential organisations expenses or activities. Institutions and public authorities should ensure that regulatory frameworks recognize the non-profit nature and public value of these income activities, supporting rather than penalizing NGOs that seek long-term sustainability through diversification.

7

7. Fund mental health and wellbeing support for youth workers and volunteers

Youth workers and volunteers – whether paid or unpaid – should have access to professional mental health and wellbeing resources. However, most youth organisations lack the financial means to provide counselling, wellbeing programmes or psychological support independently. We demand dedicated funding streams to ensure that mental health resources are available and accessible across the youth sector, rather than leaving already under-resourced organisations to shoulder this responsibility alone.

8

8. Formally recognise volunteer contributions

Volunteers make an essential contribution to youth organisations, yet their work often goes unrecognised within formal educational and professional pathways across Europe. We ask for the establishment of mechanisms for formal recognition – such as national volunteer certification schemes or the integration of volunteering into qualification frameworks – to ensure that volunteer contributions receive the value they deserve. This recognition can strengthen motivation, validate the time and effort invested by volunteers, and reduce the sense of invisibility that often contributes to burnout.

9

9. Facilitate individual support measures that enable volunteering

Many young people face barriers to volunteering due to work conditions or financial constraints, among others. Measures such as access to leave, protection from salary deductions or flexible work arrangements can significantly enhance the ability of individuals to contribute to youth organisations.

10

10. Provide training opportunities for NGO workers and volunteers

Youth organisations require continuous training and capacity building to respond to evolving technical standards and complex administrative requirements. Access to training – including project and budget formulation, digital skills, organisational development... - strengthens both individual competencies and overall professionalism of the sector.

Conclusion

Youth organisations play a critical role in addressing social issues and supporting communities in need. They empower young people to take an active role in society by creating spaces for them to learn about topics such as democracy and human rights. However, as we have seen in this policy paper, these organisations face significant challenges, threatening their ability to function.

Funding is the root problem. It's mostly short-term and project-based, which prevents organisations from building sustainable structures. Lack of funding leads to other challenges. Smaller organisations lack the resources to respond effectively when crises arise - whether from internal tensions or external pressures. Staff and volunteers burn out from increasing workloads in under-resourced environments, leading to staff departures. In addition to this, recruiting new volunteers is becoming harder as volunteers today often need a wide range of skills - from facilitation to project management - yet volunteering offers little recognition or support. These challenges add pressure to organisations that are already stretched, and in the worst case, can lead to the closing of the organisation. When youth organisations are forced to close, it is young people and entire communities who lose essential spaces and support. This weakens democratic participation and active citizenship.

To prevent this, European institutions and national governments must ensure that the conditions in which youth organisations operate are stable, fair and sustainable. Well resourced organisations are better equipped to fulfil their missions, deliver quality activities and contribute to the society and the protection of human rights. The recommendations set out in this policy paper provide a clear path towards a more sustainable youth civil society. Their implementation would support organisations directly and, in consequence, ensure that young people continue to have access to safe and participatory spaces.



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