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## INNOVATION IN YOUTH WORK



Study conducted in the framework  
of the European Academy  
on Youth Work

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# 01



## Foreword

The diversity of practices presented at the first European Academy on Youth Work event in 2019 impressively showed the innovative potential of youth work in Europe. At the same time, the questions of how innovation in youth work functions and how it could be better supported were not easily answered. On this background, the present study was initiated by the EAYW partnership in spring 2020.



The need to further support innovation in youth work was confirmed in December 2020 by the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, which underlined that especially “in a post-pandemic Europe, youth work must seek to innovate and go further than the paths already known”\*.

The research for this study was carried out between summer 2020 and spring 2021, and the youth workers who participated in this study can be expected to have been influenced by the exceptional situation caused by the Corona pandemic. Nevertheless, while some studies carried out during this period intentionally focused on the impact of the pandemic on young people or youth work, this study on purpose took a general approach to exploring, which factors support or hinder innovations in youth work, and in which way they do so.

During the study, it quickly became clear that it was necessary to define, first of all, the characteristics of innovation that are specific for the youth work context, as a basis for identifying diverse factors and explaining how they act and interact in a dynamic youth work innovation ecosystem in favour of or against innovations.

Despite its comparatively small-scale approach, this research project can be considered fundamental, as it offers an entry point to understanding how innovation works in the youth work context, while suggesting directions for more targeted and specific investigations, which could further specify needs and paths for action.

Taking a fresh look at some of the policies, funding systems, organisational structures, training offers or the collaboration with other sectors in place, so the findings suggest, might lead to developing more effective measures enabling and supporting innovative initiatives taken by youth workers together with and for young people.

We hope that this study will pave the way for further debates and steps following up on the investigated topics and conclusions among the diverse stakeholders in and connected to youth work. A big thank you goes to all the youth workers and organisations that took the time to contribute to this study!

*Sonja Mitter Škulj*  
*On behalf of the EAYW partnership*

\* Final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention, Signposts for the Future (Bonn, 10 December 2020)

# 02



## Executive Summary

### PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted in the framework of the European Academy on Youth Work. It was initiated to produce evidence and knowledge-based input into discussions of how to stimulate innovative developments in youth work and youth policy.

The main purpose of this study was to develop a model that explores conditions and measures that youth workers need in order to be able to develop innovative approaches in their work.

The research questions addressed by this study were:

- What is the meaning of innovation in the context of youth work and what are its key characteristics?
- Which are the main factors that can support or hinder innovation in youth work?
- How does innovation in youth work happen?



## METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of this study incorporated two distinctive dimensions: exploratory and explanatory.

The exploratory aspect focused on understanding and clarifying the meaning of innovation in youth work, as a fairly new phenomenon that has not been well researched before. This included desk research of existing literature, and seven focus groups with thirty-five youth work practitioners with experience in innovation from eleven European countries (conducted in autumn 2020). Prior to the focus groups, the participants were asked to submit written examples of innovation in youth work. These contributions and the reports of the focus groups were then analysed using NVivo software.

The explanatory aspect was aimed at proposing and testing concepts and theoretical models on innovation in youth work, as well as identifying causal relations between innovation examples and factors that can support or hinder innovation. This was covered by the focus groups and through a survey implemented with youth work practitioners in spring 2021. In total, there were seventy-seven responses to the survey.

Hence, this study combined quantitative and qualitative research methods, including desk research, focus groups and a survey. It was limited by the fairly small number of existing documents related to innovation in youth work, and the relatively small number of youth workers involved in the focus groups and the survey.

## KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study resulted in a definition of innovation in youth work, a theoretical model of how innovations happen, and an analysis of the factors that have the greatest roles in supporting or hindering innovations. Based on these outcomes, general conclusions were drawn and some specific recommendations for stakeholders were made. Furthermore, the research team identified new questions that should be explored further in the future.

### Defining innovation in youth work

We understand innovation in youth work to mean demonstrated methodologies, practices, tools, ways of approaching target groups, or organisational models that have novel elements, that are upgrades of existing practices, or are completely new to the youth field or to a particular context, and that enable youth work to support young people to make changes and positively affect their lives, and/or contribute to a wider social change.

The value dimension, meaning that innovation is focused not only on the production of novelty, but also on creating value, and the participation of young people as an active agency in the process of innovation are unique characteristics of innovation in youth work.

In addition, according to this definition, innovation in youth work is context-specific, can differ in scope and involves a variety of stakeholders. Both the process of innovation and the product are important.

## The ecosystem of innovation in youth work

The key elements of innovation in youth work were taken up and developed into a model of an innovation ecosystem. According to this model, innovation in youth work happens in an environment that consists of various stakeholders, relations between them, and conditions created by their actions and interactions. Altogether, they form an ecosystem. This ecosystem includes actors from the youth work field as well as many other actors, such as stakeholders from other fields, local and national governments, international organisations, donors, individuals and groups from the community; it also includes forces such as policies, economic conditions, trends and social developments. The innovation ecosystem is a dynamic and evolving environment.

### Conditions and triggers of innovation

An important part of the system are **triggers** - forces that push or motivate the process of innovation. They can be introduced by actors or come unexpectedly. Triggers can be, for example, an original idea, unmet community needs, social changes, or even crises.

Another part of the ecosystem are **conditions** - factors that provide the underlying support and create a climate favourable to innovation, such as supportive policies, flexible funding opportunities and time and space to innovate.

Triggers and conditions can be divided into three groups according to the level on

which they act: individual, organisational and contextual. Driven by the triggers, and supported by favourable conditions, youth workers, young people and others from the youth field can initiate and lead successful processes of innovation.

The study showed that **innovation in youth work is innovator-driven, with youth workers and young people being the main innovators, and that it is often initiated as a response to perceived unmet needs of young people or the community.** At the same time, the findings indicated that innovation in youth work is strongly dependent on the actions of many interrelated stakeholders and that **it requires the support of the whole system to be sustainable and successful.**

Some of the conditions and triggers that support innovation (e.g. types of funding available) are (or can be) controlled by the stakeholders within the ecosystem, while other factors (e.g. unexpected developments, such as the Covid-19 pandemic) are largely out of the stakeholders' control. Knowing which factors can be controlled or impacted by different stakeholders is of key importance in supporting innovation in youth work. This is particularly important for policy makers in the youth field, who have power over many of the contextual triggers and conditions and should ensure stable and unconditioned funding and supportive policy. Also organisations have an important role, as they could provide a framework and safe space for innovation.

Youth workers having an innovative mindset was perceived as the most important condition for innovation to happen. The



youth workers' attitude to innovation was considered more important than their competences. *More measures might be needed for enabling that attitude and supporting behaviours based on it, rather than programmes for competence building.*

The findings further suggest that there is a gap between policy and practice. *More flexible and innovation-friendly youth policy and more stable and unconditional funding opportunities might help to trigger and support more innovations in youth work.*

Another gap was identified between innovations in the youth field, and what is happening in other sectors. *More measures should be taken to promote the collaboration and exchange of ideas between the youth field and other sectors. This is particularly important in smaller communities, where according to the responses there is less influence between the different sectors.*

This study did not manage to identify big differences in how different profiles of organisations see the process of innovation. However, the responses indicate that **the size of the organisations' working communities and the type of organisational structure have a certain influence on the importance of different factors that support or hinder innovation.**

Horizontal organisations seem the most concerned with the participation of young people, their needs and the feedback coming from the wider community - which are some of the most important elements of innovation in youth work. The main challenges to innovation that these

organisations named were lack of stable funding, and being dependent on funds that require concrete outcomes and indicators. Because of this, and *considering that most organisations from the youth field belong to this category, it could be worth developing policies and funding mechanisms that can better support them in the innovation process, and remove the obstacles to innovation.*

The current ecosystem seems to work much better for hierarchical organisations, which are much less present in the youth work context. However, while more hierarchical organisations have the potential to innovate and have less issues with funding, they seem to face challenges with the very process of innovation. *Measures directed at informing those organisations about the value, benefits and characteristics of innovation in youth work could support them to use their innovation potential to a greater extent.*

Organisations from bigger communities seem to have the capacities to initiate innovations and a wider pool of diverse experiences to use, but do not have enough time and funds to innovate. *These organisations could benefit from more targeted funding that can ensure the involvement of more youth workers with sufficient time to lead innovation processes.*

Organisations from smaller and rural communities, on the other hand, reported more challenges with the lack of relevant competences of the youth workers and a significant lack of support from public bodies. Still, those organisations assessed the ecosystem as more favourable to innovation. *Since those organisa-*

*tions are obviously already in an environment that supports innovation, they could probably benefit from capacity building of their staff and more engagement with the policy makers.*

## **LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTED FOLLOW UP**

The explanatory aspect of this study was limited by the lack of prior understanding of innovation in youth work. Another, more explanatory investigation using the conclusions from this study could provide more concrete recommendations for measures and instruments that stakeholders could use to support more and more successful innovations in various youth work contexts.

# 03



## Introduction

This study on innovation in youth work was conducted in the framework of the European Academy on Youth Work, in light of its forthcoming second edition in spring 2022. The EAYW was initiated in 2018 by a partnership of a group of National Agencies for Erasmus+, youth field, and the European Solidarity Corps, with the aim to support innovation in youth work and youth work policy and to promote the development of quality youth work.

One of the findings of the first edition of the EAYW was that knowledge about the meaning and role of innovation in youth work and its influencing factors was relatively limited. Assuming that innovative approaches are needed to effectively respond to young people's changing needs and interests in today's changing societies, and aiming to produce evidence and knowledge-based input into discussions of how to stimulate innovative developments in youth work and youth policy, the network of National Agencies launched this study to inform the second edition of the EAYW.



**The main purpose of this study was to develop a model that explores conditions and measures that youth workers need in order to be able to develop innovative approaches in their work.** The model proposed was expected to visually explain the causal relations between innovations in youth work and the most important factors that can support or hinder innovation.

To this end, this study had three objectives. Firstly, it aimed to define what innovation in youth work meant. Through consulting existing literature, as well as youth workers, the study was expected to come up with a specific definition of innovation in the context of youth work, relevant for those active in the field. Secondly, this study aimed to explore the value dimension of innovation in youth work, meaning that which drives innovation processes and makes innovation worthwhile, positive and needed in the context of youth work. Thirdly, this study looked to identify mechanisms that could support dissemination of innovations in youth work.

Hence, the first research question addressed by this study was: **What is the meaning of innovation in the context of youth work and what are its key characteristics?** To respond to this question, this study looked at existing documents about innovation in the youth work context, as well as in other fields. Based on the findings, a definition of innovation was drafted, which was then presented to a group of youth workers with personal experience of innovation.

The second research question was: **Which are the main factors that can support or**

**hinder innovation in youth work?** These factors were identified through desk research of existing documents, and by analysing examples of innovation submitted by youth workers. The factors were elaborated and grouped according to established criteria, and were then presented to a group of youth workers, who could evaluate their relevance.

Finally, the third question addressed by this study was: **How does innovation in youth work happen?** Taking into consideration the context and characteristics of innovation in youth work, as well as the factors identified, a theoretical model was developed that proposed how the process of innovation in youth work is launched and sustained. The hypothetical model also incorporated the factors previously identified.

Due to the limited scope of this study, certain aspects were deliberately omitted. For example, while this study confirmed the importance of the innovations' potential for multiplication, it did not go into identifying mechanisms that can support the dissemination and spreading of innovations. **The focus was rather on understanding and explaining how innovation processes are launched, sustained and successfully completed.** Also, this study did not explore potential differences between regions and countries in Europe, or other geographical or social environments. Instead, **it focused on developing a model that would be relevant for youth work in general, while leaving room for further elaboration of any cultural or geographical factors.** In addition, the relation between innovation and the ethics and values of youth work was rather superficially explored. These lines of

inquiry remain to be investigated in a follow-up study.

Methodologically, this study is explanatory with exploratory elements. While its purpose was to explain innovation in youth work, it was constrained by the low level of prior understanding of the phenomenon. Hence, it was necessary to first understand what innovation in youth work means, before investigating how it works. More focused explanatory research could be conducted in the future using the findings from this study.

This study is addressed at stakeholders from the youth field (youth workers, youth organisations) as well as institutions responsible for planning and implementing youth policies and youth programmes (National Agencies, policy makers on local, national and European levels). While its geographical coverage was focused on eleven European countries, its relevance goes beyond and its findings are valid on a wider level in Europe and in the youth work field more generally.

The main findings from the research are presented in this study, while more detailed information can be found in the reports of the different sections of this study, available as annexes. The conclusions and recommendations at the end of this study provide hints to specific measures that could be taken by stakeholders in the youth field. However, additional research activities are needed for more concrete recommendations on instruments, measures and actions that can be taken to support innovation in youth work.



# 04



## Methodological Approach

To respond to the research purpose and objectives, the methodological approach of this study incorporated two distinctive dimensions: exploratory and explanatory.

The exploratory aspect focused on understanding and clarifying the meaning of innovation in youth work, as a fairly new phenomenon that has not been well researched before. This included desk research of existing literature, and focus groups with youth work practitioners experienced in innovation. The purpose was to explore and understand the meaning of innovation in youth work and in related fields, and the specific characteristics of innovation in the context of youth work.

The explanatory aspect was aimed at proposing and testing concepts and theoretical models on innovation in youth work, as well as identifying causal relations between innovation examples and factors that can support or hinder innovation. This was covered by the focus groups and through a survey implemented with youth work practitioners.



Hence, this study combined quantitative and qualitative research methods, including desk research, focus groups and a survey. It was limited by the fairly small number of existing documents related to innovation in youth work, and the relatively small number of youth workers involved in the focus groups and the survey.

## 4.1. DESK RESEARCH

The understanding of innovation in youth work elaborated upon in this study is based on data obtained from desk and field research. The desk research consisted of analysing existing findings and conclusions obtained from other studies, research, publications and articles linked to innovation in the field of youth work and related fields, such as educational and social work.

This research deliberately focused on the world of formal and non-formal education, while contributions relating to the world of innovation development in the technological and/or similar fields were investigated only when they had a close link with the fields of research. In fact, given the vastness of the meanings and applications of innovation, an attempt was made to delimit the scope of desk research in order to be able to develop the most significant bibliography. The desk research took into consideration mainly English language texts with a direct reference to the areas identified, which could support a definition of innovation in the field of non-formal education and identify the factors that support the creation of a favorable context to innovation. The desk

research, therefore, allowed the elaboration of a first definition of innovation; to identify some factors that support innovation; to identify some contexts of innovation at an individual, organisational, and cultural level and to highlight the importance of the value dimension in the innovation process in the field of youth work. The documents taken into consideration were analysed through a summary grid that made it possible to highlight for each text elements for the definition of innovation, for the definition of the factors and of the different contexts.

In its final stage, this first investigation phase resulted in a draft definition of innovation in youth work and a proposal for the major groups of factors that enable or support innovation in youth work. This study lists the names of all authors whose writings inspired some of the ideas contained herein. When names of authors are not mentioned, the ideas and concepts come from discussions that happened within the development of this study, while in the later part of this study, data from the focus groups is also integrated. The Summary of desk research, attached as an annex, provides a detailed review of all sources and relevant excerpts.

## 4.2. FOCUS GROUPS

The hypotheses for a definition and factors that support innovation in youth work were tested through the first phase of the field research, which consisted of seven focus groups with thirty-five youth workers from eleven European countries<sup>1</sup>, identified by the National Agencies

<sup>1</sup> Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, the Netherlands.

involved in this study. Prior to the focus groups, the participants were asked to submit written examples of innovation in youth work, using a form provided by the research team. These contributions and the reports of the focus groups were then analysed using NVivo software<sup>2</sup>. The questions for the focus groups and the form for examples of innovation are attached as annexes to this study.

The focus groups participants were youth workers and youth work managers with direct experience of innovation. Experience with innovation was a key criterion for selection because the purpose of the focus groups was to get feedback from the perspective of someone who has been directly involved in a specific innovation process. The participants were selected by the National Agencies implementing this study. In order to facilitate comparing and relating the experiences with innovation to each other, all participants were youth work practitioners working in youth organisations or other organisations working with young people aged thirteen years or older. There were no researchers, policy makers or representatives of public bodies involved as participants. The groups were diverse in terms of level of work, ranging from local, through national to international levels.

During the focus groups, the participants were asked to discuss from the perspective of their own examples of innovation, which had already been shared with the team of researchers. The focus group dis-

ussion was structured into four parts: brief introduction to the examples of innovation, reflection on what was crucial for innovation to happen and to be sustained in the concrete examples, discussion about the importance of different factors for the process of innovation, and providing feedback on the concept of innovation developed during the study.

In the next section of this study, we have integrated the outcomes of the focus groups with the findings that came from the desk research. The findings from the desk research which did not receive confirmation in the field research activities are not included in the integrated findings. Meanwhile, new elements which appeared in the focus groups and in the written examples were added. Since the comparative analysis of the written examples and focus groups reports showed consistency, all findings listed below come from both sources of data. An exception to this is when names of authors are listed<sup>d</sup>.

### 4.3. SURVEY

The survey was the third step in the research process, following the desk research and focus groups. It was conducted online from the 26th of February to the 7th of April 2021. In total, there were seventy-seven responses to the survey. Detailed analysis of the results is provided in the next chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package produced by QSR International. NVivo helps qualitative researchers to organise, analyse and find insights in unstructured or qualitative data like interviews, open-ended survey responses, journal articles, social media and web content, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required.



### 4.3.1. Structure of the survey

The survey consisted of three types of questions:

- Questions regarding the profile of the organisations
- Questions regarding the importance of the factors that support/hinder innovation
- Questions regarding the relevance of the theoretical model describing innovation in youth work

The first group of questions was aimed at classifying the responding organisations into a few categories that might have influence on the results. These categories were: size of working community, type of organisation, type of organisational structure, and type and level of financial sustainability. In the survey analysis, all received responses were disaggregated according to these criteria and comparison was made of how different profiles of organisations responded. While the organisations were also asked about the country where they are based, because of the small sample this criterion was not taken into consideration when analysing the survey.

The second group of questions asked the respondents to assess possible factors that support innovation in youth work, grading them on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The factors proposed were identified from the desk research and the focus groups. They were divided into groups according to their role in the innovation process as seen by this study (triggers and conditions) and according to the level on which they

operate (individual, organisational and contextual). A brief description of what was meant by “triggers” and “conditions” preceded the questions.

The analysis of the results gave us an overview both of the absolute importance of the factors, and their relative importance when compared to one another. In addition, using the categories explained above, we could identify any significant differences in how different organisations value factors that support/hinder innovation.

In the third group of questions, we first provided the respondents with a brief description of the theoretical models developed as part of this study, and then we asked them to assess their relevance. The responses were also analysed using the same criteria as described above.

### 4.3.2. Profile of respondents

Primary respondents to the survey were the youth workers and youth work managers who participated in the focus groups. The survey was also sent to those participants who were originally identified by the National Agencies and who provided written examples of innovation, but for different reasons could not attend any of the focus groups. Furthermore, the participants were asked to share the survey with two to three more persons, ideally one to two colleagues from their organisation and one person from another organisation from their network, either from their own or from a different country, but only to those having some prior experience with innovation. Additionally, the survey was sent to participants from youth work practice who presented a pro-

ject, tool or practice at the 1st edition of the European Academy on Youth Work in 2019 in Slovenia. Since the survey was predominantly distributed to and through the focus group participants, most responses came from countries the National Agencies of which are involved in the European Academy on Youth Work. However, responses also came from countries that were not originally involved in the study, such as Bulgaria.

Based on the first set of questions, organisational profiles were established according to each of the criteria.

## SIZE OF WORKING COMMUNITY

For this criterion, respondents were asked to fit their organisation's working community into one of the following categories:

- Capital city
- Big city
- Medium city
- Small town
- Rural area

There was no guidance provided regarding the number of citizens or any other criteria that could be used for classifying the communities under each of the categories, so it was determined by the judgement of the respondents.

## TYPE OF ORGANISATION

For this criterion, respondents were asked to choose a term which best describes their organisation's profile. According to the responses, the organisations were divided into the following categories:

- Youth organisations
- Organisations working with young people
- Public Institutions
- Private Foundations
- Other

## TYPE OF ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

For this criterion, respondents were asked to choose a term which best describes their organisational structure according to its hierarchy and the type of leadership which is practiced. According to the responses, the organisations were divided into the following categories:

- Organisations with a clear hierarchical structure with strong leadership
- Organisations with a combination of hierarchical and horizontal structure (e.g. hierarchical structure with shared leadership)
- Organisations with a mostly horizontal structure with shared leadership

## TYPE AND LEVEL OF FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

For this criterion, organisations were asked to choose a sentence which best describes their financial sustainability. According to the responses, the organisations were divided into the following categories:

- Organisations having guaranteed multi-annual funding mainly from public sources
- Organisations having guaranteed multi-annual funding mainly from private sources
- Organisations having guaranteed annual funding
- Organisations depending on different projects
- Organisations depending on fundraising/self-sustaining activities

## RELEVANCE OF CATEGORIES ESTABLISHED

Some of the categories established under these different criteria had only a few respondents. Because of the very small sample size for those categories, it was impossible to establish any conclusions, so any differences in responses were not taken into consideration, even if appearing as significant. Categories with a small sample size included:

- Public Institutions
- Organisations with multi-annual funding mainly from private sources
- Organisations having guaranteed annual funding
- Organisations dependent on fundraising/self-sustaining activities

The number of respondents from organisations with a clear hierarchical structure with strong leadership was also fairly small (about 10% of the total number of respondents), so they were taken into consideration only when analysed together with the other responses, for the purpose of establishing trends in responses according to organisational structure, ranging from organisations with less to more hierarchical organisation or vice-versa. Hence, when analysed in isolation, the responses of this group of organisations should be noted with caution and conclusions should not be made.



# 05



## Outcomes



### 5.1. DEFINITION OF INNOVATION IN YOUTH WORK

The definition of innovation elaborated on below is based on selected findings from the desk research which were confirmed and completed by outcomes of the focus groups, which were organised within this study. Hence, the definition evolved throughout this study and this final version incorporates participants' feedback.

**We understand innovation in youth work to mean demonstrated methodologies, practices, tools, ways of approaching target groups, or organisational models that have novel elements, that are upgrades of existing practices, or are completely new to the youth field or to a particular context, and that enable youth work to support young people to make changes and positively affect their lives, and/or contribute to a wider social change.**

For something to be considered as innovative in youth work it does not have to be completely new. Innovation can also mean something that is upgraded and improved, or based on existing elements (Dawe and Guthrie, 2004). Innovation in youth work can also mean building upon practices from other sectors, adapted and applied to the youth field (Chell and Athayde, 2009). For something to be considered as innovative it is also enough if it is new only in a specific context, with a particular target group or in a given geographical area, though not elsewhere (Silva, 2019). Applying existing tools and approaches in new or different ways can also be considered as innovation in youth work. Hence, it can be said that **innovation in youth work is context-specific** and whether something is considered as innovative does not depend only on the intrinsic characteristics of the innovation itself, but also on extrinsic factors related to the wider context.

The active involvement of young people in the process of innovation is one of its key identifying elements. Young people are more than just passive recipients of innovation. Rather, they always appear as an **agency in the process**. In certain instances, innovation in youth work can be initiated by young people, and facilitated and supported by youth workers. In other cases, innovation is carried out in partnerships between youth workers and young people. Even when it is the youth workers bringing innovation to young people, it is still a response to the needs of young people.

In innovation in youth work, **the process and the product are both important.**

Hence, innovation can be seen not only in concrete outcomes (for instance activities, methods), but also in processes, such as new forms of participation, new ways of approaching the target group, or new organisational models. The process of innovation can also be an innovation in itself. In any case, an actual outcome needs to exist, even if as a process. Having a new idea cannot be considered as innovation and that is where the difference lies between innovation and creativity. While creativity is about using imagination and creative thinking skills to create something new, innovation is when new ideas are turned into actual outputs (Silva, 2019; Anderson, Potocnik and Zhou, 2014).

Innovation in youth work can differ in scope. Innovation can exist on the level of overall approaches, practices and methodologies for working with young people, as well as on the level of individual methods, tools and activities. But while there are no limitations in the scope, all innovations need to be able to demonstrate impact and potential for replication (Crowley and Moxon, 2017), and add value to youth work (Dawe, 2004). Bearing in mind these requirements, innovations that are wider in scope and more impactful have higher chances of being recognised, replicated by others in the field and sustained.

In youth work, the process of innovation should be concentrated on **creating value as much as on production of novelty** (Daniel and Klein, 2014). There are two dimensions to this: firstly, innovation in youth work should be value-based, meaning that it should encompass the

values and principles that youth work is based on (Cooper and White, 1994); and secondly, it should strive towards making social change. Innovation in youth work should try to bring new answers and new perspectives to existing issues and challenges, make a positive contribution to the lives of young people, and/or respond to the needs of young people, the local community or wider society.

**Since youth work encompasses a wide eco-system, innovation in youth work involves a variety of stakeholders.** This includes, among others, youth workers, young people, youth organisations, other organisations, public institutions and policy makers. The involvement of young people should be based on the principles of participation and inclusion, while the involvement of other stakeholders comes in the form of partnerships and cross-sectorial cooperation. Connections, exchanges and personal contacts between individuals and organisations are essential to the process of innovation in youth work.

## 5.2. INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

*“The process of innovation can’t work in a vacuum; it is related to the needs, interrelated with other fields of life, to the context in which it happens and to how nurtured it is.” - one of the survey respondents.*

Innovation in youth work happens in an environment that consists of various stakeholders, relations between them, and conditions created by their actions and interactions. Altogether, they form an

**ecosystem**, which besides actors from the youth work field also includes a number of other actors, such as stakeholders from other fields (particularly from the education, social work, IT, business and other related sectors), local and national governments, international organisations, donors, individuals and groups from the community; as well as forces such as policies, economic conditions, trends and social developments. Youth organisations, youth workers, young people and other stakeholders from the youth field are part of that ecosystem, but they are not the only determinants of innovation in youth work.

This innovation ecosystem is not static - on the contrary. There is a constant movement caused by the actions of different stakeholders, conducted jointly or independently of one another. Some of these actions directly impact others, while some affect the overall ecosystem. For example, policies and interventions made by public bodies can affect individual organisations or groups of organisations, but they can also bring significant changes that affect all. Such actions become important forces in the ecosystem, which can either support or hinder innovation. Cumulative actions by many stakeholders over a longer period of time are behind the major forces, such as economic conditions, or social trends.

When taken together, all stakeholders in the innovation ecosystem, their actions and the relations between them, create a climate that can be more or less favourable to the development of innovation. This vision is close to the hypothesis of an “innovative milieu”, which sees local

environments as innovation incubators, as prisms through which innovations are catalysed (Ph. Aydalot, 1986). For innovation to happen, youth work practitioners need a fertile ecosystem with the right conditions to bolster their own creativity (Keuru, 2019).

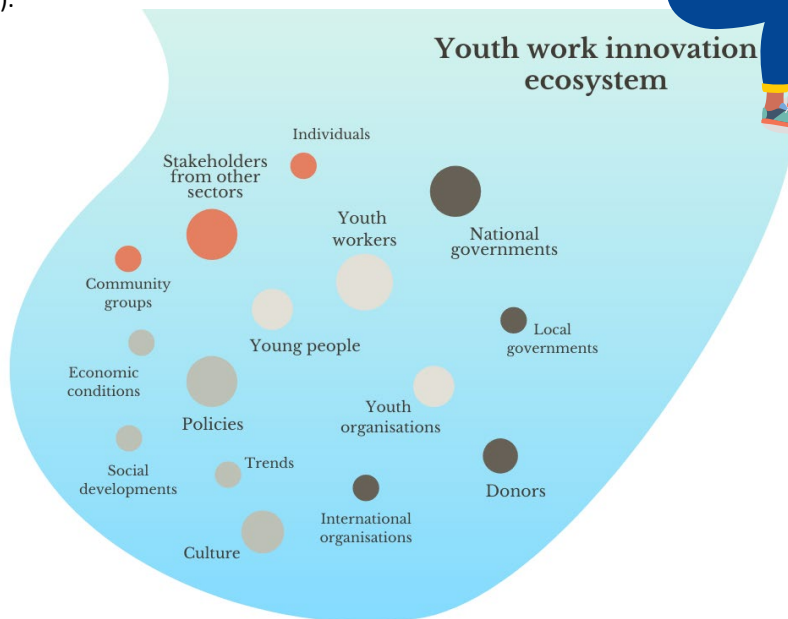


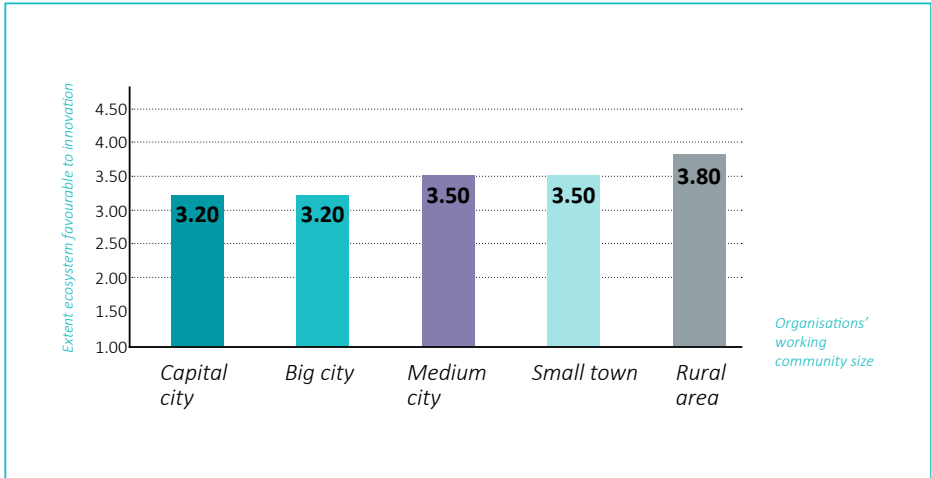
Figure 1: Youth work innovation ecosystem

The survey implemented as part of this study introduced the respondents to the idea of an ecosystem that can enable a climate favourable to the development of innovation in youth work. Then, the respondents were asked to assess how much the youth work ecosystem that they are part of is favourable to innovation, by giving a grade between 1 (not favourable) to 5 (very favourable).

**The average grade given by organisations was 3.4**, meaning that respondents assessed the ecosystems they are part of slightly favourably.

Further analysis of responses according to the criteria established showed some differences in how different groups of organisations assessed their ecosystems. Most notably, the ecosystem was assessed as more favourable to innovation by organisations working in smaller communities than by those working in bigger communities (Figure 2). The trend in responses clearly showed the youth work ecosystem becoming less favourable to innovation as the organisation's working community became larger.

Figure 2: Extent to which the ecosystem is favourable to innovation according to the size of the organisations' working community



The analysis of responses also showed that the ecosystem was assessed as more favourable to innovation by organisations with a clear hierarchical structure (4) compared to organisations with combined (3.3) and horizontal structure (3.4). However, since a clear trend could not be established and the number of organisations with a hierarchical structure is relatively small, this outcome should be noted with caution and explored further.

### 5.3. THE PROCESS OF INNOVATION

One of the key questions of this study was related to the primary driver of innovation in youth work, or to the way in which innovation happens. According to the examples shared by participants in the focus groups, in most cases the process of innovation was started either by a youth worker, or by a young person; alternative-

ly, by groups of youth workers or young persons. Only in some cases other actors were seen as the drivers of innovation, such as an organisational leader. There were no cases in which the organisation itself was seen as the initiator of the innovation.

Thus it follows that **innovation in youth work is innovator-driven, with youth workers and young people being the main innovators.** This resembles the process of innovation in other fields, which was confirmed by the desk research. This conclusion was also confirmed by the survey responses, which gave higher significance to individual factors compared to organisational and contextual ones (more on this in the next section). This puts the youth workers and young people, as drivers of innovation, in the centre of the innovation process in youth work.

As one of the respondents wrote: *“In my case, even without favourable conditions*



*within my organisation or the outside system, I am able to lead innovation and have an impact on developing such practices. I only sometimes wish to have all favourable conditions available and see how I can unleash my personal potential and scale our collective impact.”*

The fact that innovation in youth work is innovator-driven does not mean that the outcomes of the innovation process depend solely on the individual who has initiated the process. As we saw in the previous section, innovation in youth work happens within a complex ecosystem where a myriad of stakeholders act in different ways that either support or hinder the process of innovation. One of the main goals of this study was to identify in that complexity the factors that have the greatest impact on the innovation of youth work.

Such potential factors were already identified during the desk research. The initial analysis of the roles that those factors played in the examples of innovation showed that some of them were more influential to the actual process of innovation, while others had more to do with the underlying climate. Based on that, a first theoretical model was developed which distinguished between two types of factors - **triggers** and **conditions**. This model showed innovation in youth work as a function between the two different groups of factors (see figure 2).

**Triggers** were seen as the factors that provide the initial push to innovation and motivate the youth worker or the organisation to launch the process of innovation. In youth work, they could be

understood as catalysts of the process of innovation. **Conditions** were seen as the second group of factors that support innovation in youth work. Unlike the triggers, they do not directly push innovation to happen, but they are responsible for creating a climate favourable to innovation. These factors were seen as having a crucial role in making innovation possible and in sustaining a process that leads to an innovative outcome in youth work.

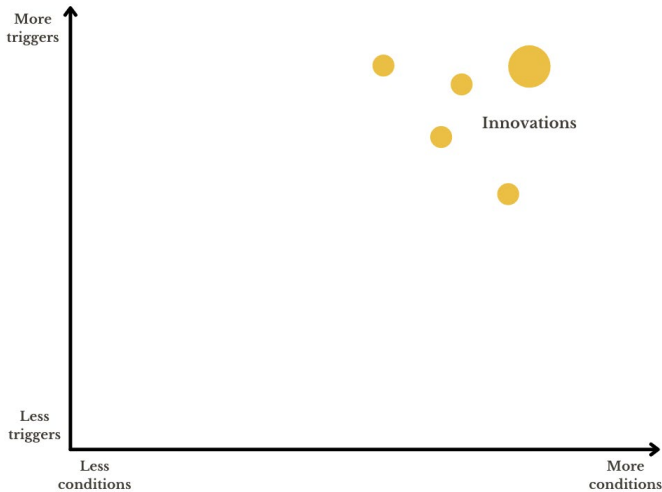
The theoretical model proposed that both types of factors are needed for innovation in youth work to happen and to be sustained, and that **the more supporting conditions and triggers exist in the ecosystem, the higher is the probability that more and more impactful innovations will happen.**

The focus groups outcomes were aligned with this hypothesis, as they showed that the more conditions that support innovation are present in the ecosystem, the more supportive is the culture for developing and sustaining innovation. The absence of these conditions, or the presence of factors that have opposite effects, contributes to creating a climate that hinders innovation. Meanwhile, the examples of innovation showed that triggers for innovation occur independently of the conditions. This means that the innovation process could also be triggered in a climate that is less supportive to innovation. At the same time, the ecosystem could have favourable conditions for supporting innovation, but concrete triggers may be missing.

This model was tested through the survey conducted as part of this study. The re-

spondents were first presented with the theoretical model, and then they were asked to assess to what extent it is true for their concrete experience with innovation in youth work. They could respond to the question by giving a grade between 1 (not at all true) to 5 (fully true).

Figure 3: The first theoretical model as it was presented to the survey respondents



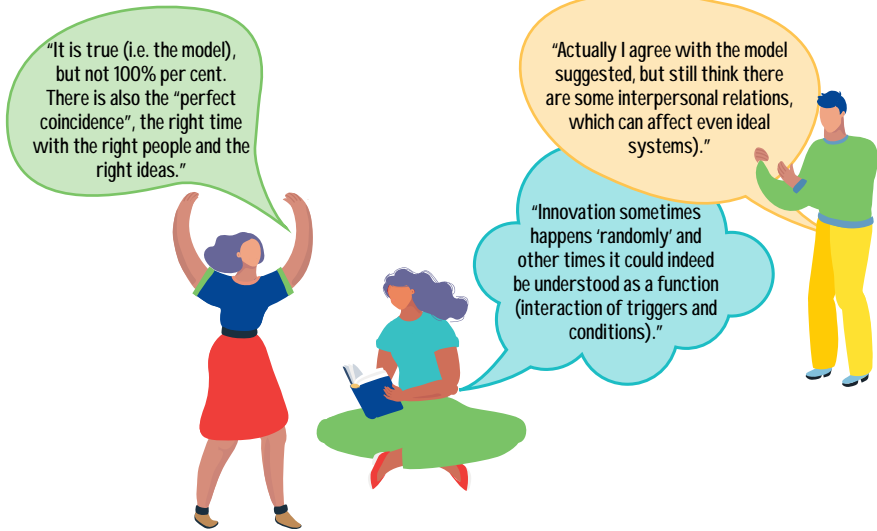
The model proposed received a **high approval rate**, as the average grade given by all organisations was 4. The analysis of data according to the criteria established did not show any trends or major differences between different profiles of organisations. Organisations from all groups gave a favourable opinion of the model, with average grades ranging between 3.5 and 4.2.

With an open question at the end, the respondents were given an opportunity to briefly describe the reasons for their rating of the theoretical model. Their responses provided some important in-

sights related to the theoretical model, elaborated on below.

**Innovation in youth work cannot be presented as a linear model.** Some of the respondents underlined that innovation in the youth work field cannot be explained as an outcome of a linear model, meaning that it should not be presumed that certain circumstances and factors will always lead to an innovative result. Many responses mentioned the importance of different things coming together in a perfect combination, creating a synergy or a momentum that can support innovation to appear. The moment of “randomness”

was also mentioned, in that it cannot be predicted if and when innovation will happen. Below are some of the responses to illustrate this point:



**Triggers as forces that put the system in motion.** While respondents clearly supported the idea of triggers and conditions, the triggers were not seen so much as part of the ecosystem itself, but more as forces, as catalysts that are able to put the system into motion and push youth work actors to innovate. Often respondents wrote of a "secret" or "magic" ingredient that makes the difference of whether innovation in a given ecosystem will happen or not.

That ingredient, or trigger, was often seen as an essential catalyst - be it a new original idea, or a crisis moment. More examples of triggers follow in the next sections. According to one respondent, triggers can even affect the overall ecosystem, since "if triggers are strong enough, the environment and conditions are also prone to change and innovate".

Here are a few more responses in relation to this point:



**Conditions provide the underlying support and are very important for innovation to happen.** The survey responses strongly confirmed the importance of conditions for the process of innovation to be successful. Nevertheless, some responses indicated that innovation can also happen without favourable conditions, as *“sometimes the lack of favoura-*

*ble conditions do not affect the ability of youth workers to innovate” and “people will innovate regardless of money, support, premises etc”,* thus reinforcing the importance of the innovator in the process of innovation. However, most responses, such as those listed below, supported the significance of conditions.

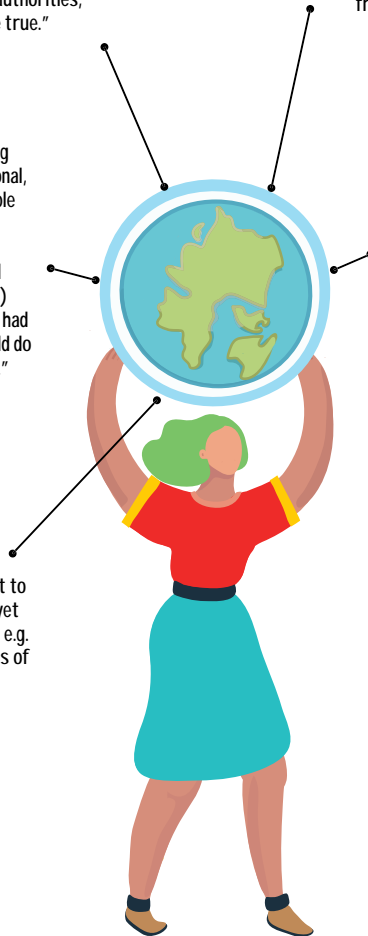
“We have realised that when we have a stable funding aimed at innovative projects and we also have the support from the local/national authorities, dreams can be true.”

“Innovation requires supportive conditions and resources as well as policy framework.”

“In my case there were existing needs on more levels (organisational, young people), there were people competent to do it and there were funds to support that. Also responsible persons in all organisations (cross-sectorial) supported the cooperation. If we had more situations like this, we would do more innovative interventions.”

“As I see it, conditions are essential for making innovative ideas ‘stick’. Some projects or concrete actions might be innovative in nature or approach, but will not last if conditions do not grant them a long life... as long as new ideas and projects are not embraced by the community and supported, they will be one shot and die out quickly.”

“We know where we want to go, but we are not there yet since important conditions, e.g. stable funding, expectations of outcomes, hinder it.”



## 5.4. MODEL OF INNOVATION IN YOUTH WORK

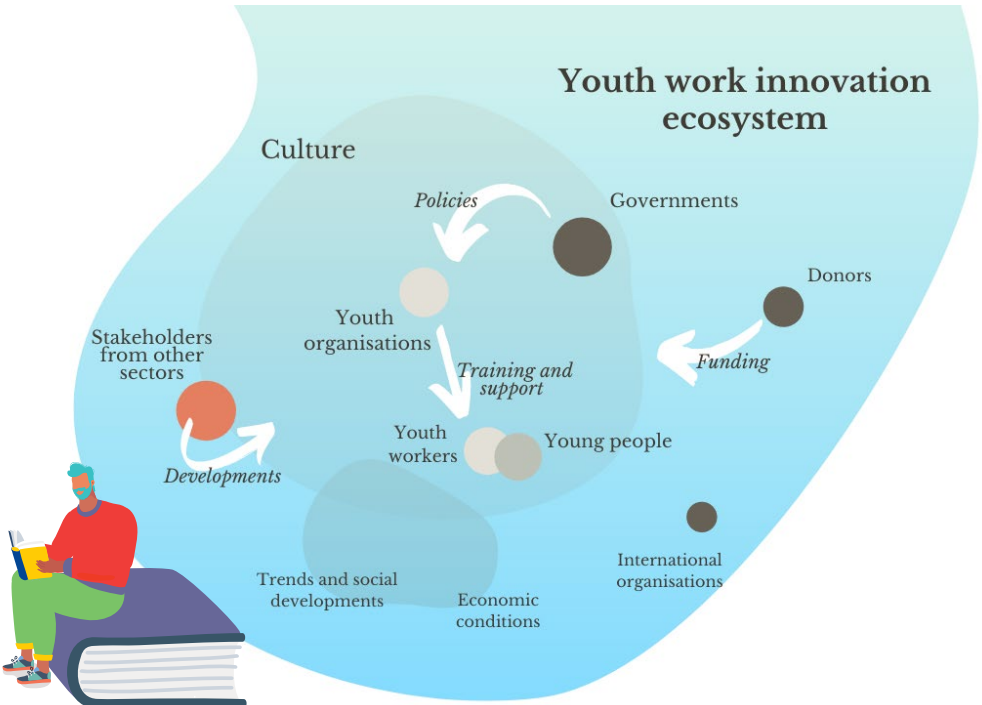
Based on the feedback received from the focus groups and survey responses, a final version of the theoretical model was created, which is based on the idea of a youth work innovation ecosystem composed of a variety of stakeholders, their actions and interactions.

The model shows one of the types of factors, the conditions, as integral elements of the ecosystem. Some of these conditions are directly created or impacted by

the stakeholders in the ecosystem (policies, funding opportunities, flexibility of donors), while others are beyond the control of individual actors and are products of the cumulative actions of many stakeholders (culture, social trends, economic conditions).

As presented in Figure 4, such an ecosystem is not a static collection of actors and circumstances. Rather, it is a constantly evolving ecosystem where elements overlap, interact and influence each other. As a result of all these forces, a given ecosystem can become more or less favourable to innovation in youth work.

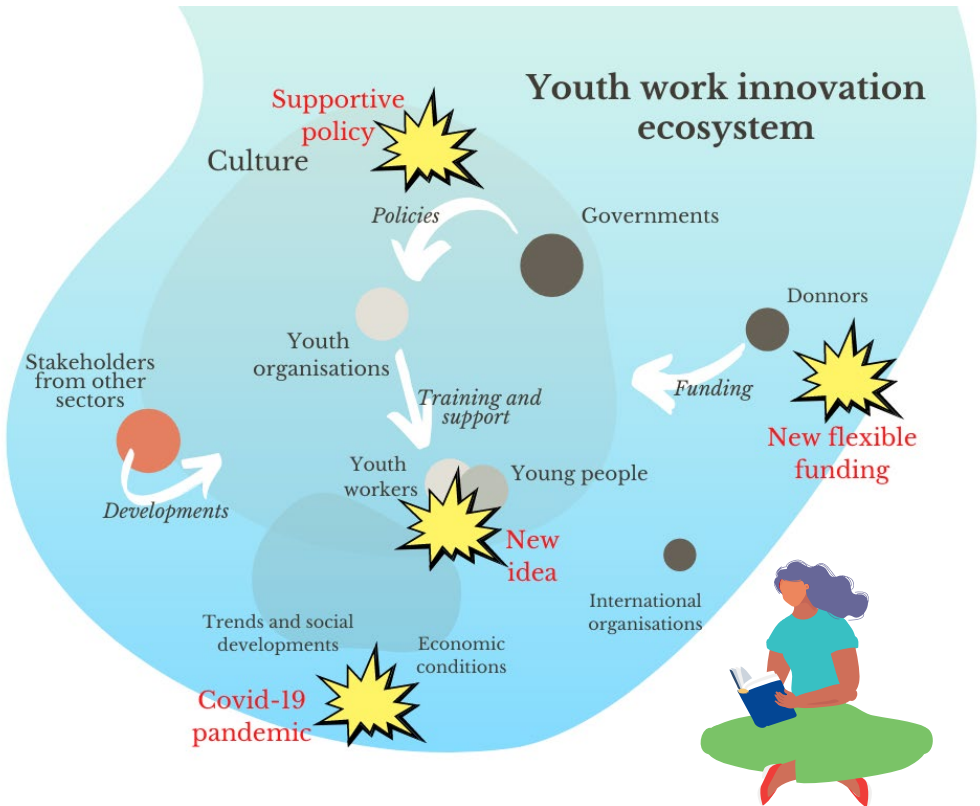
Figure 4: Youth work innovation ecosystem with integrated conditions



To this picture, the second type of factors needs to be added - the triggers. In the ecosystem described, a variety of triggers are popping in and out of existence. They are not themselves permanent elements of the ecosystem, but rather temporary catalysts, or forces which provide energy that can put the system into motion. Hence, the triggers do not have an impact on the overall favourability of the ecosystem for innovation. Rather, they appear within a given climate that is already shaped by the conditions, and provide a push for the innovation process to be launched.

Some of the triggers can be intentionally introduced by the actors that are part of the ecosystem (such as intentional efforts to respond to a need or to change organisational practices, or policies and funding opportunities that encourage innovation), while others happen randomly and cannot be predicted or controlled (such as a new idea, social changes or crisis situations). These unplanned and unexpected factors that can provide the energy needed are along the lines of the "randomness" in the process of innovation that some of the survey respondents mentioned.

Figure 5: Youth work innovation ecosystem with integrated conditions and triggers



As has already been explained, various triggers occur constantly in any given ecosystem. When a trigger occurs and provides energy to the system, three different scenarios are possible:

- It may produce no effect on whether youth work innovations happen or not
- It may provoke innovation in youth work to happen, but the innovation may not be sustained for a longer period of time
- It may provoke innovation that is sustained for a long period of time

What will happen as a result of the trigger depends on the actions of the innovators as drivers of innovation, and on the overall climate within the ecosystem - which as we saw is created by the complexity of stakeholders, their actions and interactions, and the conditions created thereof. In other words, all of the above plays a role in whether the innovation in youth work will be successful and sustainable.

Considering all of the above, the theoretical model developed in this study and described herein proposes several important hypotheses that could explain how innovation in youth work happens:

- The more favourable the climate is in the ecosystem, and the more triggers occur, the more successful and sustainable innovations will happen. Hence, innovations can be understood as a function between the number of triggers in an ecosystem and the degree to which an ecosystem is favourable to innovation.

- In a given ecosystem, the triggers appear independently of the conditions. This means that innovations in youth work can be initiated even if there is a lack of supporting conditions and a climate that is less favourable for innovation. However, the innovations originating in that kind of environment are less likely to be successful and sustained.
- In ecosystems that have a climate that is highly unsupportive of innovation, even a large number of triggers may not lead to innovations in youth work. Meanwhile, in ecosystems that are more favourable to innovation, the same triggers may result in successful and sustainable innovations.
- Since some of the conditions and triggers can be controlled by some or all of the stakeholders in the ecosystem, those stakeholders have the ability both to initiate concrete innovations and to contribute to creating a climate that is more favourable to innovation. The knowledge of the triggers and conditions that can be controlled or at least influenced could enable stakeholders to act proactively in supporting them.
- As the drivers of the process of innovation in youth work, youth workers and young people can make a difference in the number of innovations that are initiated and sustained in a given ecosystem, even when the climate is not very favourable to innovation.

In conclusion, successful innovations in youth work are products of complex processes that occur in dynamic ecosystems comprised of different stakeholders, their actions and interactions. The chances for more successful and sustainable innovations are higher when the overall climate is favourable for innova-

tion, and there are enough supporting conditions and triggers. Innovations can also be initiated by innovators in less favourable environments, but their potential is often limited.

This summary is supported by some of the comments from the survey respondents:

“Innovation can be instigated by youth workers, but requires support of the whole system to be sustainable.”

“Of course a person and an organisation can be more innovative if both triggers and conditions are the best possible, although innovation can come anyway based on the needs for it; but it can be sustained and nurtured in a more favourable situation with conditions and triggers in place.”

“In my case there were existing needs on more levels (organisational, young people), there were people competent to do it and there were funds to support that. Also responsible persons in all organisations (cross-sectorial) supported the cooperation. If we would have more situations like this, we would do more innovative interventions.”





## 5.5. FACTORS THAT IMPACT THE PROCESS OF INNOVATION IN YOUTH WORK

### 5.5.1. Individual, organisational and contextual factors

Based on the desk research, three groups of factors were proposed according to the level on which they act: innovator-driven, culture-driven and context-driven (Baskaran and Mehtan, 2016). In this division, the culture-driven factors included both those related to the organisational culture, and to the social culture. Since the scope of this study was not wide enough to study the impact of the wider social culture on innovation in youth work, we limited the second group of factors to the organisational culture. Hence, the category was renamed, and the factors studied were divided into: **individual**, **organisational** and **contextual** factors.

Individual factors are those that are intrinsic to the innovator, in this case youth workers. Organisational factors are those that are related to the youth organisation, or a different type of youth work structure. Contextual factors are those that are impacted by other actors, relations between them, processes and various social and cultural phenomena, all part of the youth work innovation ecosystem.

As part of the focus groups implemented in this study, participants were asked to name factors that have supported innovation to happen in their concrete experiences with innovation. A variety of factors

were listed, and all of them could be classified into the three broad groups established earlier: individual, organisational and contextual factors. Hence, the classification of factors was confirmed through the focus groups. The original list of factors in the three groups was revised and expanded by incorporating participants' suggestions.

The list of factors was then divided according to their relation to the process of innovation - factors that initiate the process of innovation (triggers) and factors that contribute to creating a climate favourable to innovation (conditions). Based on this criterion, a distinction was made between individual, organisational and contextual triggers, and individual, organisational and contextual conditions.

One of the key questions of this study was about the importance of different factors in supporting innovation in youth work. According to the participants in the focus groups, all three groups of factors played a role in the process, and innovation was a result of their combined impact. For most of the focus group participants, it was difficult to determine if any of the factors was particularly crucial for innovation to happen.

The survey conducted after the focus groups looked more closely into this question. The respondents could first read a brief description of what is meant by triggers and conditions in the study. Then, they were asked a set of questions in which they could assess possible factors that support innovation in youth work, grading them on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

Within the same survey, the respondents were also asked to rank a group of factors that can hinder innovation in youth work from happening. These factors were identified based on the examples of innovation presented by participants in the focus groups.

### 5.5.2. Factors supporting innovation

The results of the survey conducted show that **all three groups of triggers and conditions (individual, organisational and contextual) are important** and have a role in initiating and sustaining the process of innovation in youth work. All factors proposed, regardless of the type, received an overall average rating of at least 2.94 on the scale from 1 to 5.

This outcome supports the finding from the focus groups that **innovation in youth work is influenced by a variety of factors** and hence it is difficult to point out one that has a crucial role. It also supports the idea of an innovation ecosystem consisting of various stakeholders, their actions and interactions. Based on the survey responses, everything that is happening in the ecosystem plays a role in initiating and sustaining innovation.

The comparison between the grades given to triggers and conditions showed that on average, **conditions are assessed as more important than triggers**, which is something that was also confirmed with the narrative comments. All organisations, regardless of their profile, gave a higher average rating to conditions. This means that in a given ecosystem, it is more important that there are supportive factors that can create a climate favour-

able to innovation, than for there to be triggers to initiate the innovation process.

The comparison between individual, organisational and contextual factors showed that **individual level factors are assessed as slightly more important when compared to others**. The difference between individual and other factors is more expressed in the triggers than in the conditions. This finding confirms the conclusion that **innovation in youth work is innovator-driven, with youth workers and young people having the greatest roles in initiating the process of innovation**.

However, the difference in grades given to different factors is too small to conclude that there is a big difference in their importance. This can also be seen from the five highest rated conditions and triggers that support innovation in youth work, which include factors from all three groups.

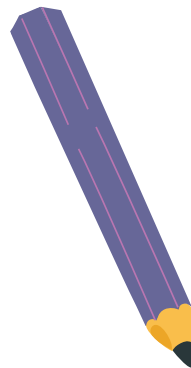


Figure 6: Conditions that support innovation in youth work with the highest grades:

Factor	Level of factor	Average grade
Youth workers have an innovative mindset – having an open mind and free spirit, being flexible, practicing divergent thinking	Individual	4.6
Organisation provides frame, space and adequate time for creativity and innovation	Organisational	4.3
Organisation supports experimentation and space to fail without consequences	Organisational	4.3
Stable funding that is not conditioned upon concrete outcomes	Contextual	4.3
Organisation nurturing a culture of sharing	Organisational	4.2

Figure 7: Triggers that support innovation in youth work with the highest grades:

Factor	Level of factor	Average grade
Unmet individual or community needs, such as needs of young people	Contextual	4.4
Desire of the youth worker to create something new	Individual	4.3
Having a new idea, or an idea to do something differently	Individual	4.3
Major social changes and developments	Contextual	4.3
Crisis situations and unexpected events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or economic crisis	Contextual	4.2

These responses indicate that **innovation in youth work is most often triggered by emerging needs or circumstances in society, or by youth workers' own idea or initiative to innovate.** Meanwhile, **for innovation to be successful and sustained, youth workers need an innovative mindset, but also strong support from their organisation and stable, unconditioned funding.**

The factors that received the lowest grades show the conditions and triggers that had the least impact on respondents' examples of innovation.



Figure 8: Conditions that support innovation in youth work with the lowest grades:

Factor	Level of factor	Average grade
Support for innovation from parents, schools and other social actors	Contextual	3.4
Organisation that has a horizontal structure and management	Organisational	3.6
Youth workers having adequate experience in the area of work in which the innovation process is launched.	Individual	3.7
Social trends that are supportive to the process of innovation	Contextual	3.9

Figure 9: Triggers that support innovation in youth work with the lowest grades:

Factor	Level of factor	Average grade
Push for innovation coming from policy makers	Contextual	2.9
Developments in other sectors	Contextual	3.3
Conducting a structured process aimed at innovation	Organisational	3.5
Receiving a grant that demands innovation from the organisation	Organisational	3.5

These responses show that examples of innovation in youth work are less frequently triggered by policies or grants to organisations demanding innovation. Developments in other sectors and organisations' own initiatives also lead to innovation less often. From the conditions proposed, the least influential is support coming from those outside of the youth field, along with organisations' horizontal structure and youth workers' past experiences.

It should be noted that while the respondents rated the factors thinking from the perspective of their own experiences with innovation, they were not asked to assess the level to which those factors influenced the actual innovation processes.

So the data gathered represents a summary of opinions from youth workers and youth work managers influenced by concrete experiences with innovation.

Furthermore, the study does not go into the reasons for why certain factors are more or less important, and whether they could be more important if they were more present. For example, the fact that a "push for innovation coming from policy makers" received the lowest rating does not explain whether there are no existing policies supporting innovation, or whether current policies are not effective. Similarly, it cannot be concluded whether developments in other sectors and support from those outside of the youth field are not relevant or if they do not reach in-

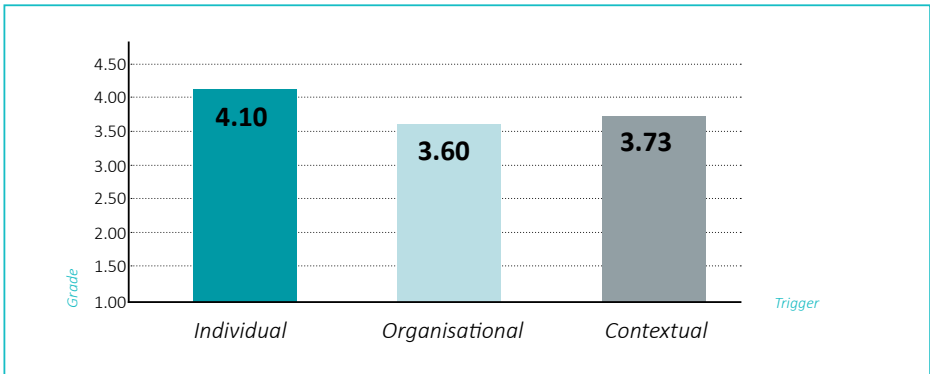
novators in the youth field. These are all questions for further analysis. What can be concluded at this point is that there is an apparent gap between youth policy and practice, and between the actions of policy makers and stakeholders from other sectors on the one hand, and the process of innovation in youth work on the other.

### 5.5.3. Importance of triggers for supporting innovation

This section includes a more in-depth overview of the role that various triggers have in the process of innovation.

All three groups of triggers (individual, organisational and contextual) were assessed as relatively high by all profiles of organisations. On average, the highest grade was given to the individual level factors (4.10), followed by contextual (3.73) and organisational factors (3.60). This supports the hypothesis that innovation in youth work is innovator-driven. However, the results also show that triggers coming from the organisations (such as an organisational need to change practices) or from the wider context (such as unexpected events and crises), are also very important for initiating innovation.

Figure 10: Comparison of the average grade for the different types of triggers



In this part of the survey, the respondents were asked to rank three individual factors, four organisational factors and seven contextual factors. The following figures show the average ratings of the factors under each group.



Figure 11: Importance of triggers on individual level

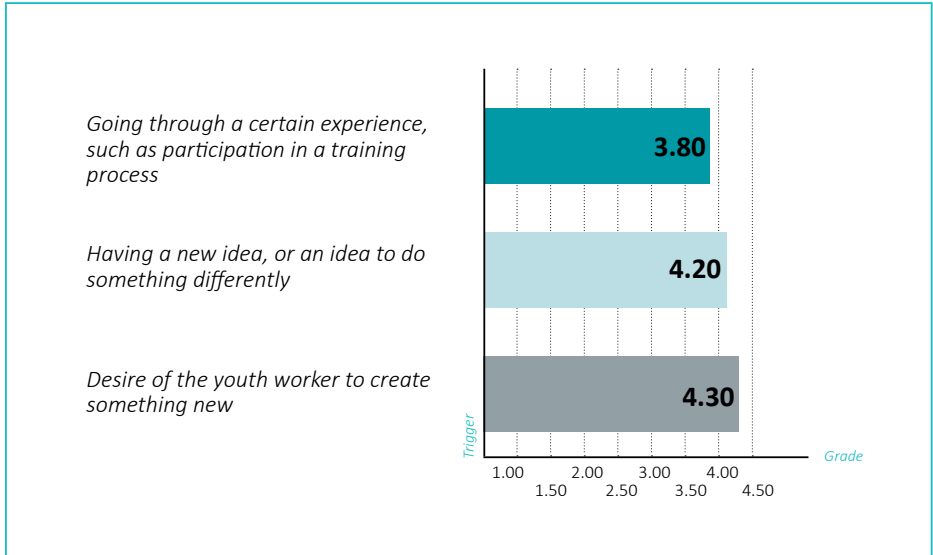


Figure 12: Importance of triggers on organisational level

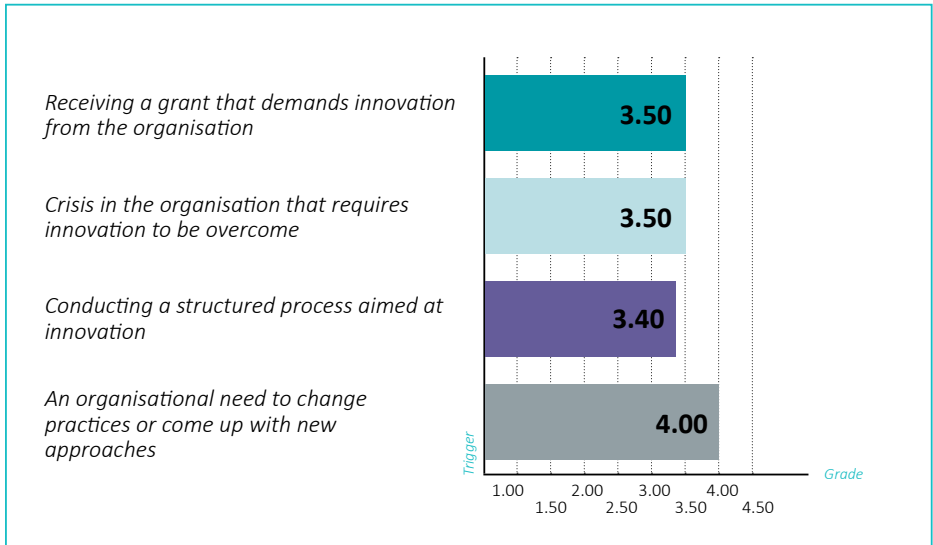
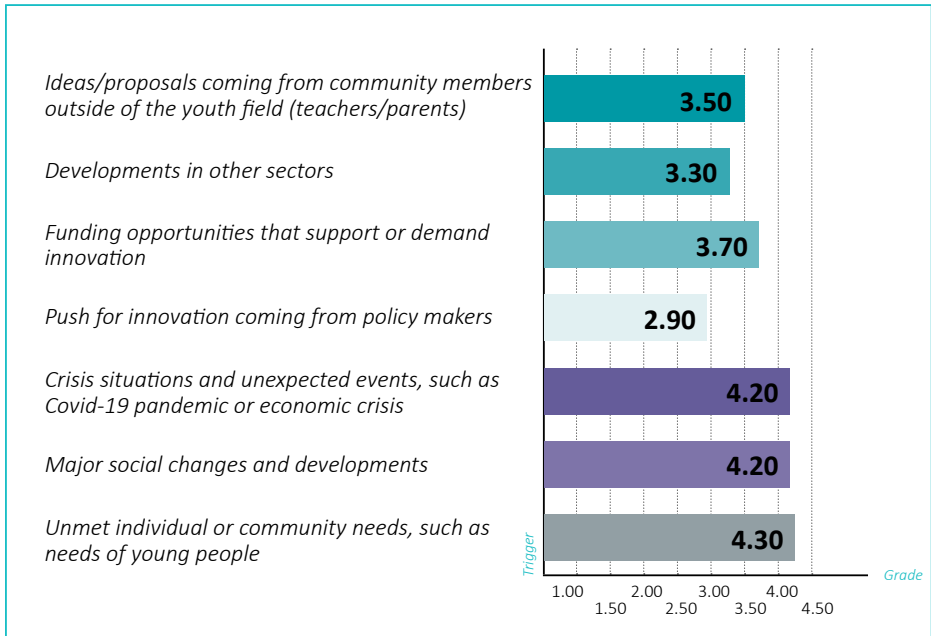


Figure 13: Importance of triggers on contextual level



The responses to these questions give a clear indication of the factors that are deemed the most important for triggering processes of innovation. According to the respondents, a **significant impact on the innovation process can be made by innovators' new ideas and desires to create something new. Organisational needs to change practices or come up with new approaches** also appear as significant, when compared to other organisational factors. And on a contextual level, **major social changes, unexpected events and crisis situations, as well as existing unmet individual or community needs** are clearly the most important. Actions by policy makers and donors, and actions by actors in other fields are obviously lagging behind.

The analysis of responses according to the criteria for establishing different profiles

of organisations did not show very significant differences. Still, some interesting observations can be made, especially when analysing responses according to organisations' working communities and organisational structures.

**Organisations working in capital and big cities** value individual level triggers higher than the average, which may mean that they **put even more value on the actions of the individual innovator**. For instance, the factor "having a new idea" received an average rating of 4.9 among organisations from big cities. Another factor that was assessed as significantly higher by this group of organisations was "developments in other sectors" (4 compared to 2.9 to 3.4 by others), which may indicate a **higher interaction between different sectors in larger communities**.

When it comes to organisational structure, the more the organisation has a clear hierarchical structure and a strong leadership, the higher the grades given to all three groups of triggers. This trend is present in almost all triggers, with just a few exceptions. The following contextual level factors show the opposite trend, gaining in importance as the organisations become less hierarchical, with more shared leadership:

- Unmet individual or community need, such as needs of young people
- Ideas/proposals coming from community members outside of the youth field (teachers/parents)

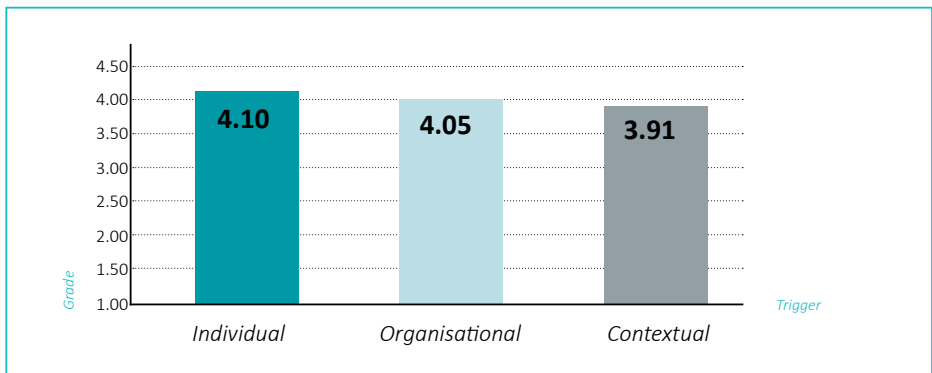
This could mean that **more horizontal organisations are more concerned with the community needs** and are more open to feedback by community members.

### 5.5.4. Importance of conditions for supporting innovation

This section includes a more in-depth overview of the role that various conditions have in the process of innovation.

Similar as in relation to triggers, all three groups of conditions (individual, organisational and contextual) were assessed relatively high by all profiles of organisations. On average, the highest grade was again given to the individual level factors (4.10), but now it was very closely followed by organisational (4.05) and contextual factors (3.91). The fact that the differences between the average grades of conditions are so small shows that all different types of factors play almost equally important roles in creating a climate favourable to innovation. This supports the hypothesis of an ecosystem where a variety of inter-related stakeholders, their actions and interactions impact the success and sustainability of innovations.

Figure 14: Comparison of the average grade for the different types of conditions





In this part of the survey, the respondents were asked to rank three individual factors, six organisational factors and 9

contextual factors. The following figures show the average ratings of the factors under each group.

Figure 15: Importance of conditions on individual level

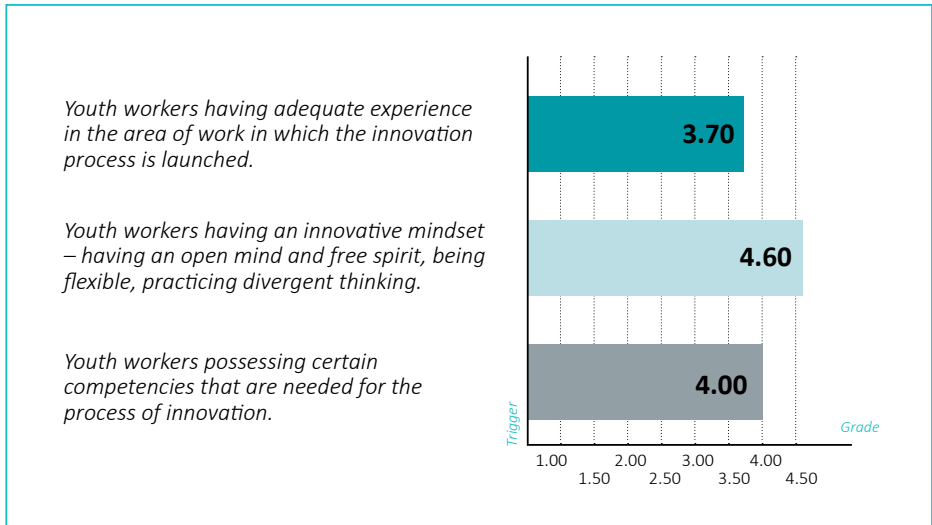


Figure 16: Importance of conditions on organisational level

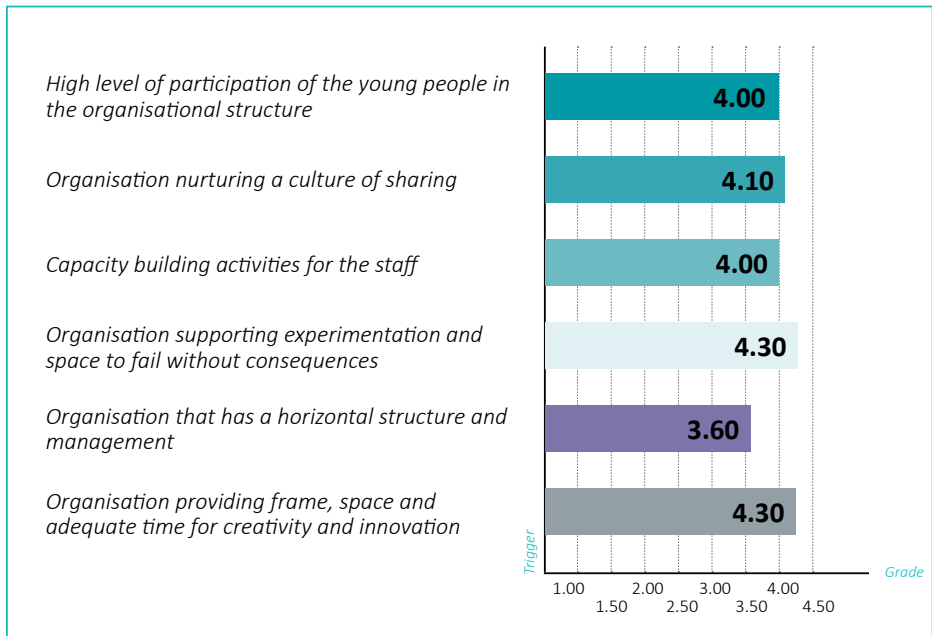
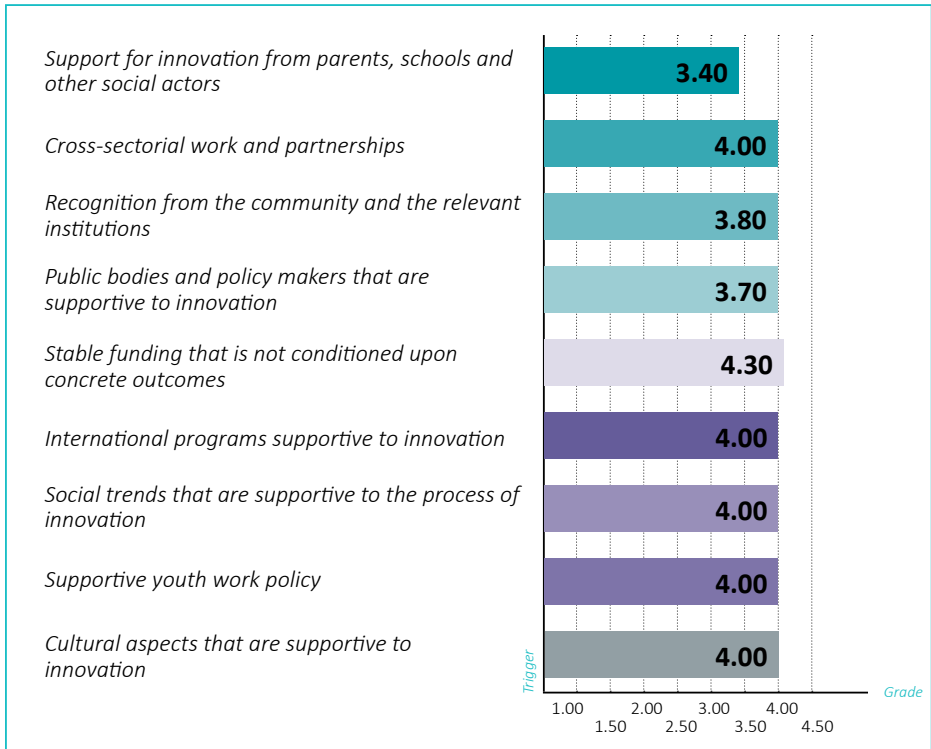


Figure 17: Importance of conditions on contextual level



Clearly, the most important individual level condition is that youth workers have an innovative mindset, which includes having an open mind and free spirit, being flexible and practicing divergent thinking. This factor received a higher grade than the factors that had to do with youth workers' knowledge, skills and experience, meaning that the innovators' attitude was deemed the most important for supporting innovation. The most important factors expected from organisations are that they provide the frame, space and adequate time for creativity and innovation, as well as support for experimentation and space to fail without consequences. Finally, on a contextual level, the highest importance was given

to stable funding that is not conditioned upon concrete outcomes. It is important to note, however, that other contextual level factors are also highly ranked and thus considered very important, such as "Cross-sectorial work and partnerships", "International programs supportive to innovation", "Social trends that are supportive to the process of innovation" and "Supportive youth work policy", which all received an average rating of 4.0.

The analysis of responses according to the criteria for establishing different profiles of organisations showed that all groups of organisations gave quite similar responses.

Some differences can be observed again between organisations that have a different organisational structure. Similarly as in relation to triggers, the more the organisation has a clear hierarchical structure and a strong leadership, the higher the grades given to all three groups of conditions. But the exceptions from this rule are interesting, as the only factor with an opposite trend is "Organisation that has a horizontal structure and management", which shows that having a horizontal structure is more important for organisations that already have a more horizontal structure. In addition, the factor "High level of participation of the young people in the organisational structure" also received the highest grade among organisations that have a mostly horizontal structure with shared leadership.

### 5.5.5. Factors hindering innovation

Under this question the respondents were presented with eight conditions that could hinder innovation (make innovation difficult to happen). The factors proposed were extrapolated from the examples of innovation and focus group discussions. They were not divided according to level, but were assessed altogether.

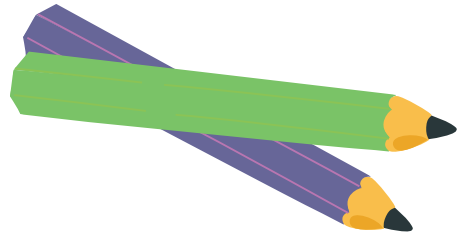
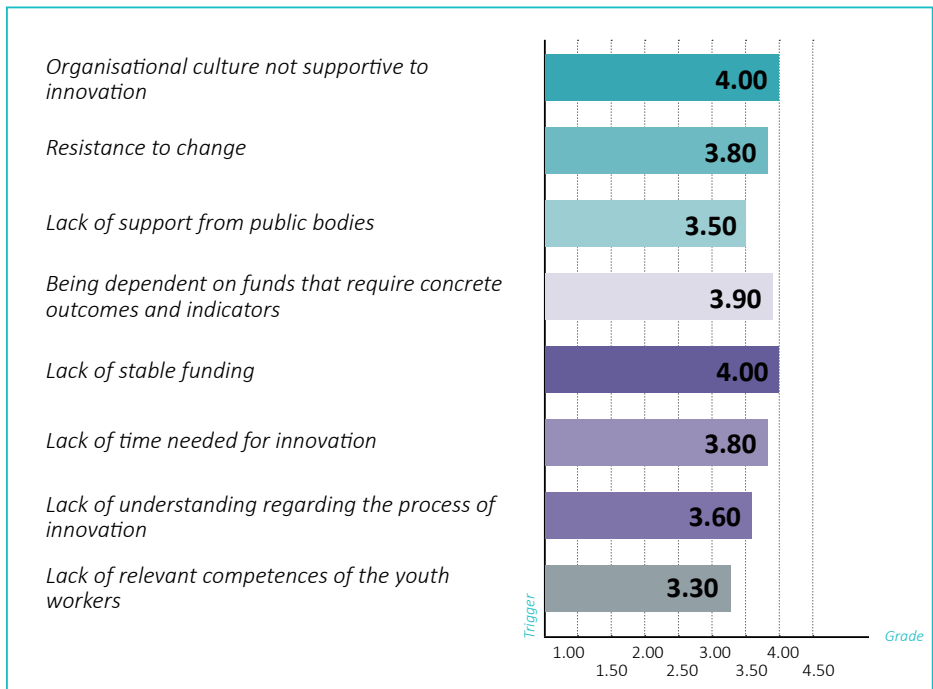


Figure 18: Importance of factors that hinder innovation



The responses to this question outlined four of the proposed factors as the most important for the respondents:

- Lack of stable funding (4.0)
- Being dependent on funds that require concrete outcomes and indicators (3.9)
- Lack of time needed for innovation (3.8)
- Resistance to change (3.8)

It is evident that three out of the top four factors that hinder innovation are related to the wider context. The two that are considered as the most important are related to lack of funding and the type of funding available.

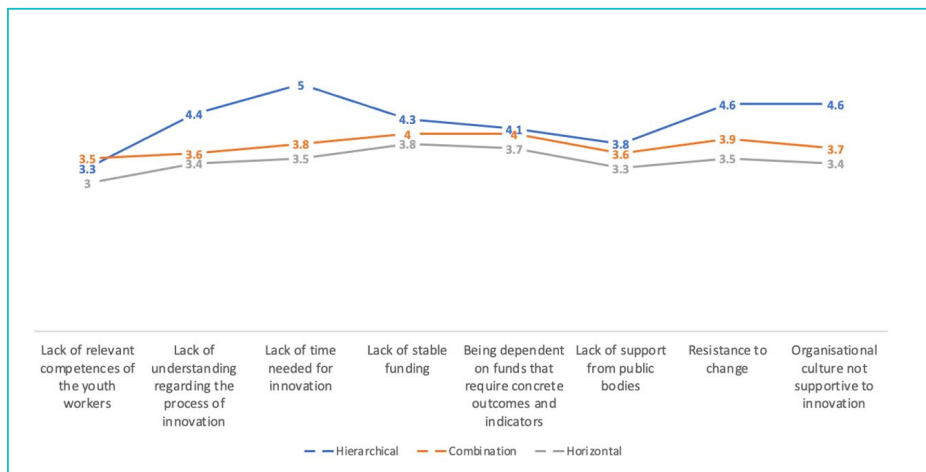
In contrast, the lack of relevant competences of youth workers was assessed as the least important factor that hinders innovation in youth work. This should be further investigated, as it could mean either that youth workers already have the

relevant competences, or that the level of youth workers' competences does not impact the process of innovation in youth work.

The analysis of responses according to the criteria established revealed some differences, mostly related to organisational structure and working community.

Most notably, it is evident that organisations with clearer hierarchical structure and stronger leadership give more importance to the factors that hinder the process of innovation. The more horizontal the organisational structure is and the more the leadership is shared, the less challenges to innovation are reported. The difference is particularly visible in the following factors: "lack of time needed for innovation", "resistance to change", "organisational culture not supportive to innovation" and "lack of understanding regarding the process of innovation", which are obviously the areas in which hierarchical organisations have the most challenges related to innovation.

Figure 19: Importance of factors according to organisational structure



Meanwhile, the analysis of the responses according to the organisations' working community shows that there are opposing trends for different factors - some appear as more important for organisations based in bigger communities, and others for organisations in smaller communities. The following factors are assessed as more important for organisations working in bigger communities than for those working in smaller ones:

- Lack of time needed for innovation
- Lack of stable funding

This could mean that available funding is more important in bigger communities, but also that organisations working in those communities have less time to innovate.

There is an opposite trend for the factor "Lack of relevant competences of the youth workers", which appeared more important for respondents coming from smaller communities.



# 06



## Conclusions and recommendations

This study resulted in a definition of innovation in youth work, a theoretical model of how innovations happen, and an analysis of the factors that have the greatest roles in supporting or hindering innovations. Based on these outcomes, general conclusions were drawn and some specific recommendations for stakeholders were made. Furthermore, the research team identified new questions that should be explored further in the future in order to gain a better understanding of how innovation in the youth work context happens and how it could be better supported.

This chapter highlights the main points established during the research, drawing relevant conclusions confirmed by all research methods, proposing measures based on them and setting directions for further analysis.



## DEFINING INNOVATION IN YOUTH WORK

The desk research conducted at the beginning of this study showed that there are not many existing documents specifically addressing innovation in youth work. Only a small part of the analysed studies, research, publications and articles were related to this topic. Most of the analysed documents touched on innovation while writing more generally about youth work, or dealt with innovation in related fields, such as education or social work.

We could not find any **definition** that explains what innovation in youth work means, so the definition composed at the beginning of the study was mainly inspired by concepts of innovation coming from other fields. The definition proposed received a high level of approval from the participants of the focus groups, but it was expanded with some elements that came out of the discussions. As defined in section 4.1, our final definition of innovation is as follows:

“We understand innovation in youth work to mean demonstrated methodologies, practices, tools, ways of approaching target groups, or organisational models that have novel elements, that are upgrades of existing practices, or are completely new to the youth field or to a particular context, and that enable youth work to support young people to make changes and positively affect their lives, and/or contribute to wider social change.”

This definition outlines some **aspects of innovation that are unique and specific for innovation in the field of youth work.**

These include:

- The **active participation of young people** not only as passive recipients of innovation, but also as an active agency in the process. In many of the examples of innovation considered, young people were seen in the role of innovators, alongside the youth workers.
- The value dimension of innovation in youth work, meaning that the process of innovation should be focused not only on the production of novelty, but also on creating value. This value was expressed in the form of supporting young people to make changes and positively affect their lives, and/or contribute to wider social change.

These two, together with other elements that were already present in the original proposal, now form the core of the concept of innovation in youth work. The remaining elements are:

- **Innovation in youth work is context-specific.** In addition to something completely new, it can also be something that is upgraded, improved, based on existing elements, or based on practices from other sectors, adapted and applied in the youth field. Something can also be considered as innovative if it is new only in a specific context, with a particular target group or in a given geographical area, or if it is about applying existing tools and approaches in new or different ways.

- **Innovation in youth work can differ in scope.** It can exist on the level of overall approaches, practices and methodologies of working with young people, as well as on the level of individual methods, tools and activities.
- **Both the process and the product are important in innovation in youth work.** Innovation can be found in concrete outcomes (such as activities or methods), but also in processes (such as forms of participation and new ways of approaching the target group). The process of innovation could also be an innovation in itself.
- **Innovation in youth work involves a variety of stakeholders.** These include, among others, youth workers, young people, youth organisations, other organisations, public institutions, policy makers and others.

ernments, international organisations, donors, individuals and groups from the community.

As elaborated on in section 4.2, the innovation ecosystem is a **dynamic and evolving environment**, with a constant movement caused by the actions of different stakeholders, conducted jointly or independently of one another. Examples of these include activities of organisations and policy makers, youth policies and funding schemes. Parts of the ecosystem are also the needs of young people, as well as major forces such as economic conditions, trends and social developments.

## CONDITIONS AND TRIGGERS OF INNOVATION

Some of the stakeholders' actions and interactions represent factors that can make the overall climate in the ecosystem more or less favourable to innovation. We call these factors **conditions**, and we divide them into three groups according to the level on which they act: individual, organisational and contextual. The conditions by themselves do not initiate innovations, but they provide the underlying support for innovations to be successful and sustained. There is another group of factors that bring energy to the ecosystem and act as catalysts of the process of innovation. We call them **triggers**, and they, too, can be individual, organisational and contextual. Driven by those triggers, and supported by favourable conditions, youth workers, young people and others from the youth field can initiate and lead successful processes of innovation. **This makes innovation in youth work inno-**

## THE ECOSYSTEM OF INNOVATION IN YOUTH WORK

The key elements of innovation in youth work were taken up and developed into a model of an **innovation ecosystem**. According to this model, innovation in youth work happens in an environment that consists of various stakeholders, relations between them, and conditions created by their actions and interactions. Youth organisations, youth workers, young people and other stakeholders from the youth field are part of that ecosystem, as are a number of other actors, such as stakeholders from other fields (education, IT, business sector), local and national gov-



**vator-driven, but also strongly dependent on the actions of many interrelated stakeholders.**

As shown in section 4.3, this model of innovation received a high approval rate from the respondents of the survey conducted as part of this study. The examples submitted of innovation and the focus group discussions also supported the idea of innovations happening within a complex ecosystem composed of a variety of stakeholders, where conditions create a certain climate and triggers push the process of innovation.

An important aspect of the model is that some of the conditions and triggers that support innovation are (or can be) controlled by the stakeholders within the ecosystem. Examples include: types of funding available, organisational approaches and policies in the youth field. Other factors are out of the stakeholders' control, or take much more time and effort to be impacted. Examples include: unexpected events (such as the Covid-19 pandemic), or the attitude of a national culture towards innovation. **Knowing which factors can be controlled or at least impacted by different stakeholders is of key importance in supporting innovation in youth work.** This is particularly important for policy makers in the youth field, who have power over many of the contextual triggers and conditions.

To support innovation in youth work, another important question is related to the main factors that can support or hinder innovation. The desk research, the examples of innovation and the focus groups allowed the team of researchers

to compile a list of conditions and triggers working on the three levels (individual, organisational and contextual) that could potentially support innovation in youth work. Respondents were then asked to rate those factors according to their level of importance. The results were analysed cumulatively, as well as by profiles of organisations differing by type, working community, organisational structure, and type and level of financial sustainability.

All factors, regardless of their type, received a high rating, with average grades above 2.94 on a scale from 1 to 5. The ratings were consistently high among organisations of all profiles. This indeed shows that **everything that happens in the youth work ecosystem plays a role in whether innovations will happen and how successful they will be.**

Due to the high grades given to all factors, it was impossible to point out one, or even a few factors that are of crucial importance for innovation. However, the conditions were evidently regarded as more important than triggers. This means that what is crucial for innovators in the youth field is that **the overall system is supportive to innovation.** In other words, **it is not enough just to spark innovation, but also to sustain it.**

Not only organisations have an important role in this, as they could provide a framework and safe space for innovation, but policy makers as well, as they should ensure stable and unconditioned funding and supportive policy. The important role of policy makers and organisations in sustaining innovation was also confirmed by the factors that hinder innovation, as

survey respondents listed a lack of stable funding, being dependent on funds that require outcomes and indicators, and lack of time needed for innovation as the key obstacles to innovation.

While slightly less important than the conditions, the triggers also received a high overall rating. Individual level triggers were assessed as more important than others, thus confirming again that **innovation in youth work is most often innovator-driven**. Youth workers' new ideas and desires to create something new were considered the most important, along with organisational needs to come up with new practices, and a few contextual factors that had to do with unmet needs (such as needs of young people), major social changes and unexpected events (such as the Covid-19 pandemic). **Though the important role of youth workers was evident, the trigger that was seen as the most important overall was "Unmet individual or community needs, such as needs of young people"**.

Youth workers, as the key drivers of innovation in the youth field, received much attention throughout the study. In fact, youth workers having an innovative mindset - having an open mind and free spirit, being flexible, practicing divergent thinking – was considered the most important condition for innovation to happen. However, the factors that were related to youth workers' competences and adequate experience in the area of work received lower grades. In addition, lack of competences of youth workers represented the least important factor hindering innovation. This may indicate that **youth**

**workers' attitude to innovation is more important than their competences**. *More measures might be needed for enabling that attitude and supporting behaviours based on it, rather than programs for competence building.*

According to the respondents, innovation is least frequently triggered by direct pushes coming from policy makers. Funding opportunities that support or demand innovation were also not recognised among the top triggers, though they appear among the top conditions needed to sustain innovation. The finding is complementary with the factors hindering innovation. Here, lack of stable and flexible funding appeared as the two main challenges. All of this may be an indication of **a gap between policy and practice, with policy makers introducing funding schemes that push for innovation, while what is seen as more effective is having more open funding streams that allow for innovations that are driven by youth workers' own initiative and the needs of young people**. *More flexible and innovation-friendly youth policy and more stable and unconditional funding opportunities might help to trigger and support more innovations in youth work.*

**Another gap that can be identified is between innovations in the youth field, and what is happening in other sectors**. While major social changes and developments were listed among the key triggers that support innovation, developments in other sectors and ideas coming from individuals outside of the field were regarded as less influential. Meanwhile, cross-sectorial work and partnerships were assessed as important conditions to sup-

port innovation. More measures should be taken to promote the collaboration and exchange of ideas between the youth field and other sectors. This is particularly important in smaller communities, where according to the responses there is less influence between the different sectors.

## RELEVANCE OF ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND WORKING COMMUNITY

This study did not manage to identify big differences in how different profiles of organisations see the process of innovation. The survey responses revealed quite uniformed responses across organisations of different types (youth organisations, other organisations etc.) and across organisations with different levels of and types of financial sustainability. However, the responses indicate that **the size of the organisations' working communities and the type of organisational structure have a certain influence on the importance of different factors that support or hinder innovation.**

The division of organisations according to how hierarchical their structure is and how strong their leadership is produced some results that deserve attention. While only a very small number of responses came from organisations with a clear hierarchical structure and strong leadership (less than 10%), it was still possible to observe trends in some factors becoming more important as the structure was becoming more hierarchical, or the other way around.

The more hierarchical organisations are, the more importance they give to all factors that support innovation - both conditions and triggers. There are some exceptions to this trend though, and they can be telling of the organisations with more horizontal structure and shared leadership. Namely, the only triggers that gain importance as organisations are more horizontal are the following:

- Unmet individual or community need, such as needs of young people
- Ideas/proposals coming from community members outside of the youth field (teachers/parents)

Similarly, mostly horizontal organisations give the greatest value to the following conditions:

- Organisation that has a horizontal structure and management
- High level of participation of the young people in the organisational structure

This seems to indicate that horizontal organisations are the most concerned with the participation of young people, their needs and the feedback coming from the wider community - which are some of the most important elements of innovation in youth work. Meanwhile, the main challenges to innovation that these organisations named were lack of stable funding, and being dependent on funds that require concrete outcomes and indicators. Because of this, and *considering that most organisations from the youth field belong to this category, it could be worth developing policies and funding*

*mechanisms that can better support them in the innovation process, and remove the obstacles to innovation.*

The need for more suitable interventions is supported by the fact that horizontal organisations assessed their ecosystem as much less favourable to innovation compared to hierarchical organisations. **It seems then that the current ecosystem works much better for hierarchical organisations, which are much less present in the youth work context.** These organisations report obstacles to innovation as well, but completely different ones compared to horizontal organisations: lack of understanding regarding the process of innovation, lack of time needed for innovation, resistance to change and an organisational culture not supportive to innovation. It seems from this that while more hierarchical organisations have the potential to innovate and have less issues with funding, they have challenges with the very process of innovation. *Measures directed at informing those organisations about the value, benefits and characteristics of innovation in youth work could support them to use their innovation potential to a greater extent.*

The size of the organisations' working community also produced some differing patterns, particularly when comparing bigger and smaller communities. Namely, organisations from bigger communities value individual level triggers higher than the average, thus putting even more importance on the actions of the individual innovator. These organisations also gave more importance to the developments in other sectors, indicating a higher level of cross-sectorial interaction in larger com-

munities. However, those organisations also reported more challenges with lack of time needed for innovation, and assessed the ecosystem as less favourable compared to organisations from smaller communities.

This shows that organisations from bigger communities have individual capacities to initiate innovations and a wider pool of diverse experiences to use, but do not have enough time and funds to innovate. *These organisations could benefit from more targeted funding that can ensure the involvement of more youth workers with sufficient time to lead innovation processes.*

The situation is different with organisations from smaller and rural communities, who reported higher than average challenges with the lack of relevant competences of the youth workers. In addition, organisations from rural communities face a significant lack of support from public bodies. Still, those are also the organisations that assessed the ecosystem as more favourable to innovation. *Since those organisations are obviously already in an environment that supports innovation, they could probably benefit from capacity building of their staff and more engagement with the policy makers.*

## LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

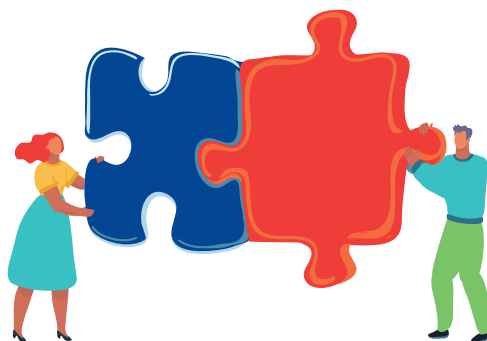
It is important to note that this study is too limited to make any final conclusions regarding the differences between organisations in how innovation is initiated and sustained. The indications shared here and the reasons behind them should be explored further by involving more stakeholders. Furthermore, other factors that could potentially make a difference should be explored as well. Knowing the different factors which impact different profiles or organisations is important so that organisations can be supported in a more targeted and effective way.

As elaborated on in the introductory chapter, the explanatory aspect of this study was limited by the lack of prior understanding of innovation in youth work. A great part of the research activities was directed at understanding what innovation in the youth work context means. Hence, many important questions remained unanswered and require further analysis in a follow-up study.

These include, but are not limited to:

- the influence of the wider cultural and geographical environments on innovation in youth work
- the mechanisms behind dissemination and multiplication of innovations
- what kind of influence various factors have and how they are influencing the process of innovation
- the value dimension of innovation in youth work
- the role of youth workers as drivers of innovation and related needs for competence development in organisations
- the links between the structure of organisations in the youth field and their capacities of innovation (linked to the above point)

Another, more explanatory investigation using the conclusions from this study could provide more concrete recommendations for measures and instruments that stakeholders could use to support more and more successful innovations in various youth work contexts.



# 07



## Selected Bibliography

This bibliography lists the studies, reports and magazines that were found to be the most relevant for this study.

In addition, annex 1 to this report, which is available as a separate document, presents the list of all documents that were consulted during the desk research and directly influenced its approach and findings. It summarizes information related to the author(s) and title, the purpose of the document, the definition of innovation, the factors of and obstacles to innovation, and some additional elements (where relevant).



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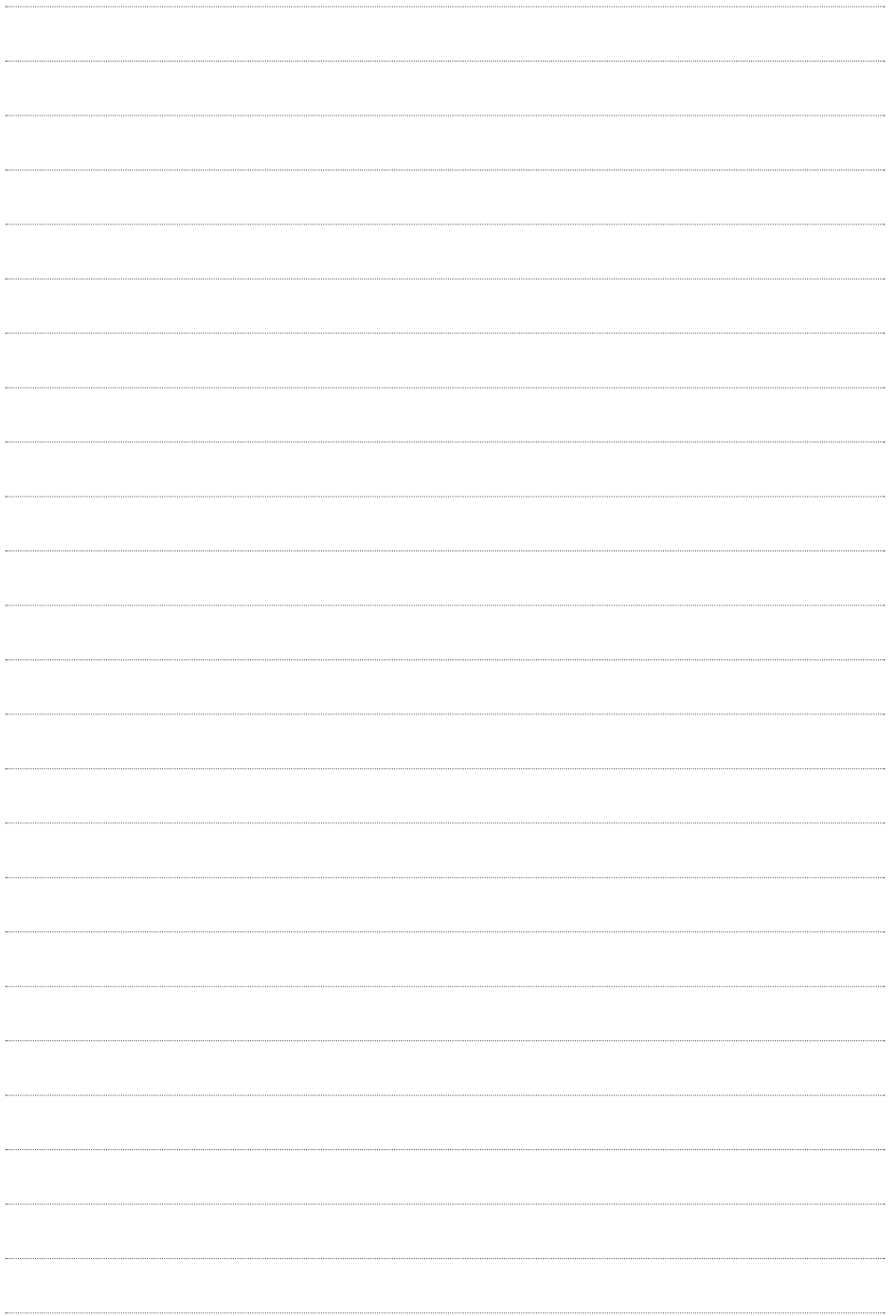
### Reports:

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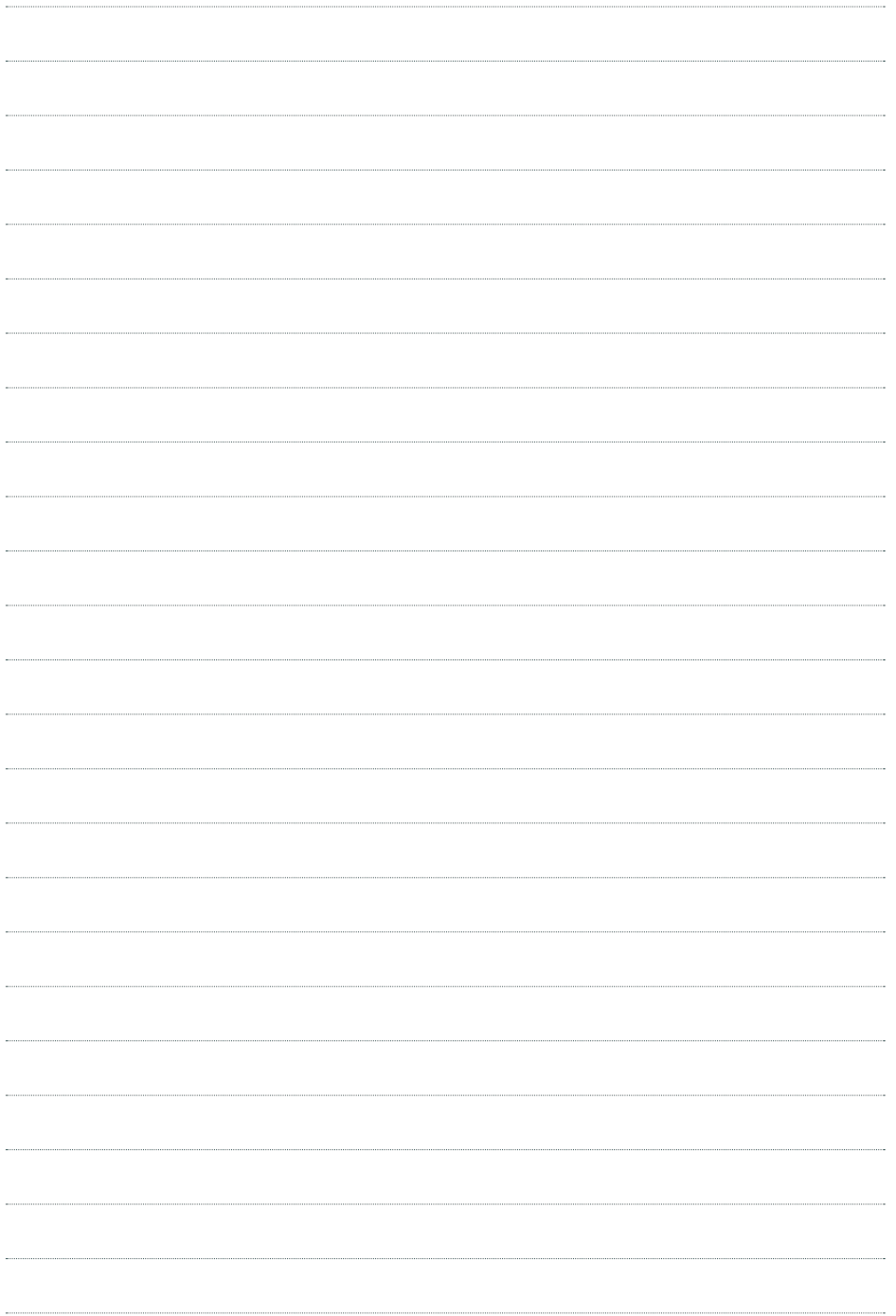
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## NOTES ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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MOVIT has been the Slovenian National Agency for EU programmes in the field of youth, currently Erasmus+, youth field, and the European Solidarity Corps, since May 1999. In this role, MOVIT manages indirectly centralised EU budget funds and supports different forms of learning mobility activities in youth work. It also runs activities to promote the development of (European) youth work, solidarity, and non-formal education. MOVIT also serves as an office of Eurodesk ([www.eurodesk.si](http://www.eurodesk.si)) and the SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre (SALTO SEE). SALTO SEE belongs to the network of SALTO-YOUTH Resource Centres ([www.salto-youth.net](http://www.salto-youth.net)).

Since 2018, MOVIT has been coordinating the European Academy on Youth Work partnership, which in 2021 includes the Youth National Agencies of Austria, Belgium- FL, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden and SALTO-YOUTH Resource Centres.

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## About this publication

What is innovation in youth work and how does it happen? What can support or hinder innovation in the context of youth work? These were some of the questions investigated in this study on innovation and youth work conducted by the European Academy on Youth Work.

The outcomes include a definition of innovation in youth work, a theoretical model of how innovations happen, and some conclusions based on an analysis of the factors that play the greatest roles in supporting or hindering innovations in youth work.



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