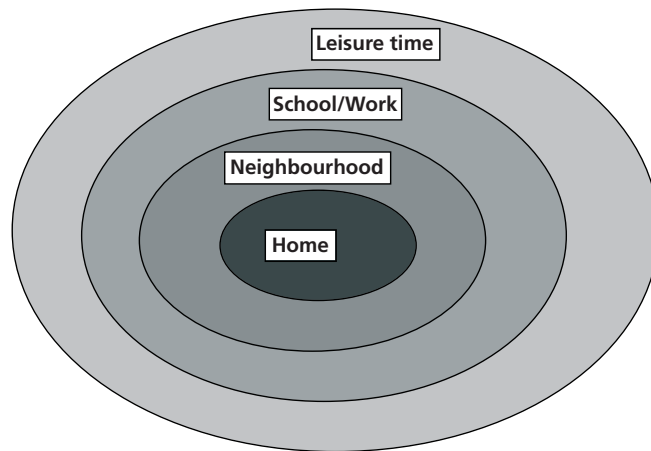


# 4. Young people and their context

## 4.1 Young people in their communities

Young people do not live on an island. They are embedded in a social structure composed of different people (parents, teachers, trainers, employers, etc.) who all have different expectations and interactions with the young people in question. Though the first priority of youth workers is with the young people, it would be impossible to ignore the influence of the people in their surroundings.

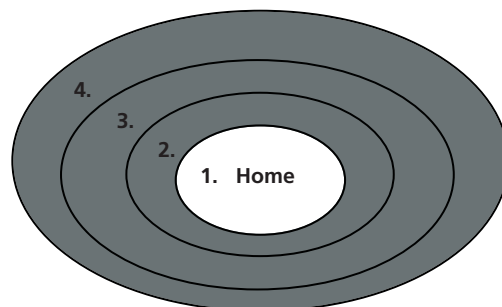
Han Paulides (1997) divides the world of young people into four parts:



In all four parts, young people get into contact with other people: friends, parents, colleagues, fellow students, neighbours, shopkeepers, policemen, teachers, coaches, etc. All these people have contacts with them and influence their behaviour. Therefore it is important as youth worker to get their support when developing projects with the young people. They are also a valuable source of information for getting to know youth and their world better. It is important to stop and reflect for a while on how best to get these people on your side.

It is not easy for youth workers to position themselves in this spider web of relationships. Youth workers should remain very clear and honest with the young people about the positions they take and will not or cannot take. When talking or co-operating with people surrounding the young people, they should be transparent about they you are doing. This will help enormously in building up a relationship of trust with the young people as well as their environment (see 6.3: *Building trust*). This element of mutual trust must be the foundation for all other work.

The four different environments of young people, as defined by Paulides, can be approached in different ways and for different reasons. Below you find an overview.



The first part is formed by the people directly surrounding the young people: their family. It is important to have a good connection with this group as the participation of a young person in your activities can depend on the family's approval of your work. A way to reach the parents might be

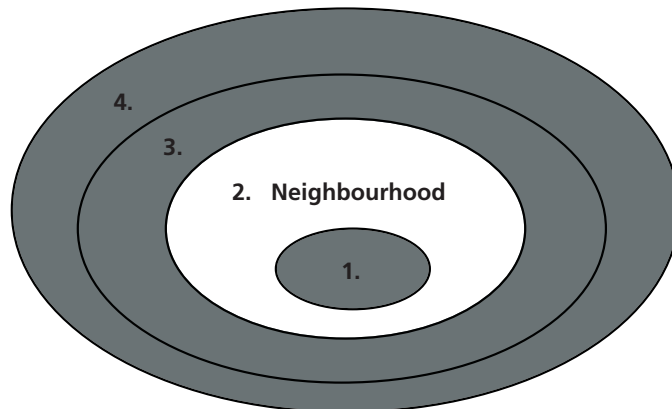




by organising open door days, home visits or consultancy hours. Take into account that it sometimes takes some perseverance, as the parents might face barriers to interact with you, such as lack of time, language difficulties, disrupted home situations or distrust towards official institutions that might tell them what to do. One way around this is to meet the family in other places such as community centres, talk to people on the street and be around and available. It is important for the parents to know you and to realise what it is you are doing in order to build up a relationship based on trust.

#### **Good practices – A concrete example**

*A youth centre once started a discussion with young people about parents, and came to the conclusion that most of the parents always said they only wished their children to be happy, but that this mainly meant that they were ordered to be happy. The young people said their parents did not understand that smoking, wearing tight jeans, staying out all night or dating that boy who had left school without a diploma could make them feel good. A huge discussion followed, since some of the young people could not understand how others could enjoy smoking or wearing weird clothes, but in the end agreed it all depended on your own choices. They then decided to make a play out of this, with the help of the youth worker, and perform it for their parents and others. For some young people the play turned out to be a way to open the dialogue again with their parents in a way other than the usual arguments they had, which were not very constructive, and to come to some mutual understanding.*



Networking with the people in the neighbourhood of the young people is also important for the success of your youth work. When the relationship is good, they will be more willing to participate when their help is needed, and also come to you when there are problems. So for the sake of the image of your activities, their support is crucial. A way to work on your PR is to involve local radio, television and newspapers as well. The more everyone, not just the young people, know about your activities and feel involved with your work, the better it is for the final result.

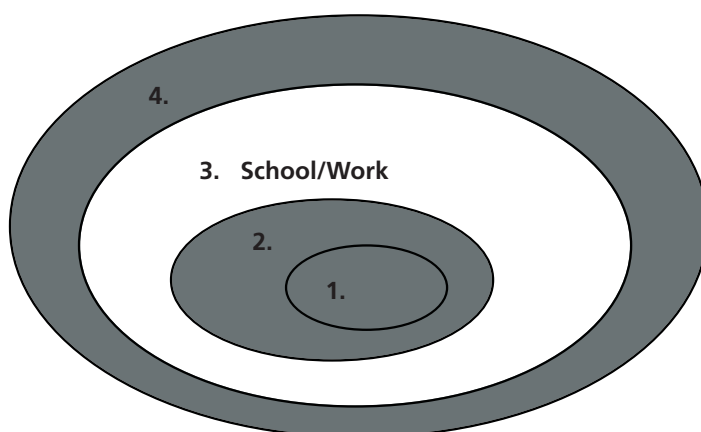
#### **Good practices – A concrete example**

*In 1999, a summer camp was held in a small village in the Czech Republic. Since this meant quite an invasion of foreign young people in the town, it was necessary to involve people from the community. Young people were invited to join the camp, teachers in the village were asked to translate, the communal kitchen supplied food and the camp started with a tour through the village, led by the mayor and accompanied by a journalist from the local paper. In the last week, a football match was organised between the young people and the local team. Everyone in the village was aware of the presence of the visitors and became involved in one way or the other. Because of this, the young people were not seen as intruders, but were welcomed as guests.*

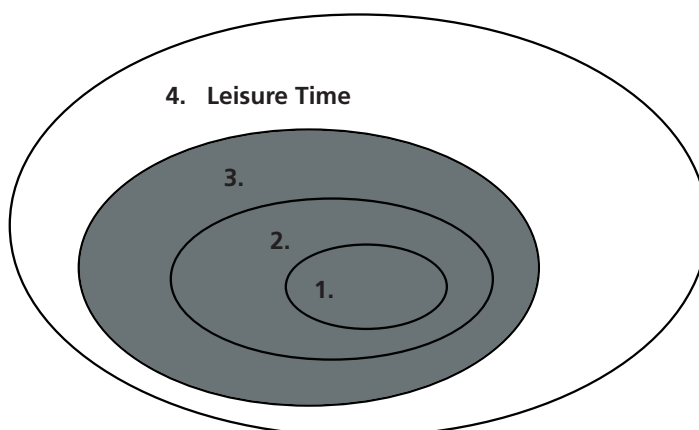


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Another group in the direct surroundings of your target group are peers – their friends and acquaintances. Peers are important since their judgement of your work can determine the view that their friends have of the activities you are doing. When you manage to convey the message that your activities are fun and they can learn something interesting at the same time, the chances of young people joining your project increase rapidly. Local media can again play an important role in the image building of your activities, so make use of them as well.



Schools can supply a youth worker with basic information about the neighbourhood, from the number of young persons at the school to the cultural structure, the number of school leavers and the level of education. But you might also consider co-operating with teachers or even employers when setting up non-formal education programmes. An additional advantage of this is that it could be possible to use equipment and space available in the school. A disadvantage, however, might be that the young people are already averse to school and unwilling to spend more time there, so careful preparation and deliberation is necessary.



The fourth sector in which young people move is the one of leisure time. Youth work can also be situated in this sphere. Creating links with other people organising leisure time activities can be very useful, allowing the exchange of ideas, experiences and resources pertaining to work with young people with fewer opportunities. We will discuss this further in 4.2: *Setting up partnerships*.



### Good practices – A concrete example

The voluntary club “smile” began its works in 2001. It is a non-formal group of young people working together in a small town in South-East Poland. Most of the participants were high school students the idea of developing a “Group Initiatives” came up when a new director for the local cultural centre was nominated. Bialobrzegi, the town where the project was developed, does not offer many possibilities for young people or for adults. There is no cinema, no swimming pool, no parks, and no place apart from discos or pubs where children could spend their time after school. There is also no place for children from problematic families to find shelter and do their homework, therefore they started to think of how they can change this situation and asked the director of the local cultural centre for help. She offered them space to realise their own projects, they were divided into 5 groups working on 5 main topics: science, journalism, renovation, management and European issues. The main aim of this project was to integrate youth and local community as well as to create a special place where young people could spend their free time. Young volunteers also wanted to take care of youngsters with difficult family situations and help them with homework, leisure time and activities such as dancing, computer workshops, paintings, drawings, etc. The activities prepared within the project: group planning (all members were involved in the planning process), workshop for volunteers (how to work with children), workshops for children run by volunteers (foreign languages, painting, dancing, etc.) with the participation of local authorities, local youth workers and retired teachers in the project.

Important to keep in mind is the fact that it is not possible to build a good relationship in one meeting with these different sectors surrounding the young people, but it requires a long-term investment of time, effort and resources. All opportunities should be used to build up this network of trust to move together toward common or similar aims. This is the basis for future co-operation.

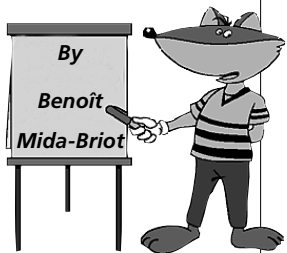
## 4.2 Setting up partnerships

As mentioned in the previous section: Young people in their communities, it is advised that the youth workers do not see young people as isolated. Like the notion that young people do not live on islands, youth workers do not either. They do not work alone with the young people in question. So why not work in partnership with other professionals and volunteers who work directly or indirectly with the same target group? This co-operation may take place at the grass roots level while organising some timely activities, for example negotiating with the city hall for access to a municipal community centre for workshops or getting the authorisation to organise a festival in the town centre. These examples may be the beginning of co-operation that will perhaps grow and become a long lasting partnership.

Working together with others does not only multiply efforts and resources towards similar aims, but it will also generate a more holistic and strengthened approach to work with the target group. It is important to share views and experiences with other professionals dealing with similar issues (for example creating opportunities for those that always seem to fall out of the boat) and it boosts motivation to continue to put your efforts into a common cause.

But real partnerships are more than brief, scheduled co-operations. It requires some thinking to find out what the different partners in the partnership are striving for and where your fields of work could be complementary and working towards the same goals. The process of setting up and maintaining working partnerships needs time, effort and resources. But this investment is well worth it, offering the rewards of increased motivation, insight into different working practices and the sharing of ideas.

So with whom would you team up? Youth workers may have their own professional contacts or may get to know others (street workers, teachers, social workers, the police) through their daily work who work with the same young people. These people are working with the same target group (for example, young people with fewer opportunities) in different fields of their lives and at different





moments. Often meetings or seminars around societal topics related to youth are a good place to meet different actors working on these topics (inclusion, drugs prevention, AIDS education, etc.). You might find the right contacts for co-operation opportunities when setting up activities, but these synergies may also turn into longer-term partnerships between organisations.

Especially when working with young people with fewer opportunities, it is important to create partnerships between organisations that reach the target group in different fields of their lives, because the impact of youth work might be continued in the class room or in other projects.

There are some requirements before you can set up working partnerships:

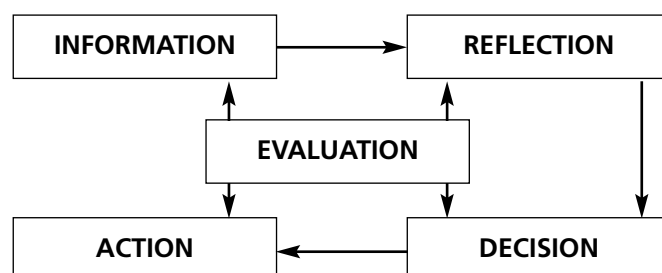
- The partners should share common aims in their work or they should at least be compatible with each other;
- The target group (young persons with fewer opportunities) should be at the centre of the interventions (as we will argue in 6.1 : *Ethos*). This could be, for example, to empower the young people or to coach them through further steps on their pathways in life or towards social inclusion;
- There should be the will of the different partners and their hierarchies to join in such a partnership – and time and resources should be freed to work on this co-operation;
- The different actors should have some common educational principles, or their differences should be reconcilable;
- The working spirit or organisational culture should be compatible or there should be strong motivation to open up and adapt to each other's working culture;
- Last but not least, there should be efficient communication channels and moments to discuss, plan, implement and evaluate the partnership.

The direct beneficiary of these synergies will be the target group, and also the organisations involved in the partnership. Discovering different ways of working together and complementing each other will clearly benefit both.

### ***IRDA+E: guidelines for setting-up partnerships***

If you have never worked together in the kind of partnership described above, we would like to provide you with a step-by-step approach which can help youth workers willing to go beyond simple co-operations towards the conception and the implementation of long lasting partnerships. These guidelines might seem a bit formal and abstract, but they have a logical structure that you can adapt to your needs.

The prerequisite to starting a partnership is of course that you have found one or more organisations or professionals that are interested in working together. In the ideal case they should fulfil the requirements mentioned above, but do not get bogged down in these details. Then the real partnership management can start. Here are some tips and questions to ask at each of the five stages.





## 1. The information stage

When jumping into a partnership you need to gather information on why you want to co-operate with other organisations or professionals. You can make an inventory of your organisation's motivation for it, the concrete needs and the resources available to invest in the partnership. Make a list of the following key elements (and of course your partners could do the same).

### Questions

- What are you (and your colleagues) looking for in the partnership?
- What is the position and recommendations of your board or hierarchy regarding such a partnership?
- What are the expected benefits from the co-operation? For the target group? For the organisation?
- What are the prior experiences in networking in your organisation? What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What are the available resources (human, time, place, material, budget)?
- Who is working with the young people with fewer opportunities and in what way?
- Are there external factors that are pushing you towards partnerships or keeping you from establishing them (funding, politics, etc.)?
- Will the partnership be balanced (equal contributions, equal benefits, equal involvement)?

## 2. The reflection stage

After you and your partner organisations have gathered this information, you need to compare with each other and consider different possibilities of co-operation. All partners should work towards a common view of the potential of working together on only well-defined issues. During negotiations you should move towards a framework for future shared action. This could be written out, creating a common document on which a decision for co-operation could be based. Some questions that should be addressed in this document are the following.

### Questions

- What are the common aims?
- What format will the partnership take (informal, common projects, working groups, information sharing)?
- What common activities could be implemented and what steps would be necessary to do so?
- What evaluation criteria could be used to assess the partnership and with what frequency and format should it be used to monitor and evaluate the partnership?
- What is the timetable of the partnership (how long, how often, deadlines, etc.)?
- How will the tasks be divided (who does what)?
- What are the commitments from the different parties (also in resources)?
- How best to have the staff of the organisation get to know each other better?
- What are the training needs? Do you foresee training the people involved using seminars, training, job shadowing, meetings, etc.?
- What communication strategy could be set-up (how will the partners communicate with each other, on which matters and how will they keep each other informed)?
- Who will co-ordinate and monitor the partnership implementation?
- What is the budget projection (incomes and expenditures)?



### Some tips

- The benefits for the partners should be highlighted.
- The framework should be precise but also allow for some flexibility.
- Concrete and visible results should be targeted for each step. This keeps the partners' motivation high.
- Target realistic aims and work.

## 3. The decision stage

The youth worker and the individual people around the table in the reflection stage are in most cases not the only people involved in the partnership decision making process (this being expected when it involves human and financial commitments). In the ideal case, the organisations of all partners should be involved in the whole process of setting up the partnership, but if this is not the case, there will be a moment when an official decision on the concrete partnership must be taken. Depending on the structures of the different organisations involved, this will be a more or less formal procedure. Some youth workers might have the freedom to decide on such partnership agreements themselves, whereas in other organisations it might have to pass the whole hierarchy (which of course also has consequences for your time management). If you need a formal document, here are some questions that might help you draft it.

### Proposal(s) to submit to the decision level(s)

- Describe the common action to be implemented: the aims, action plan(s) and stages.
- Include the key items developed above such as timetable, division of roles and tasks, resources, co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation.
- A section should be precise regarding the length of the present partnership agreement as well as provisions concerning the process for possible modifications. Consider, for example, how partners could withdraw from the agreement and what would happen in such cases.

### Tips

- Be precise enough when presenting the working proposals to the decision level(s) but avoid getting into too much detail. Even though the partnership agreement should be precise, it should also build in some flexibility in case there is a need for changes.
- Find out what your hierarchy's concerns are and develop the partnership (or at least the partnership agreement) accordingly. For example, show the foreseen multiplying effect if this is important for one of the partners, or if gender balance is paramount in working with the target group, show how you deal with it during your co-operation.
- Aim to maximise support from your and your partner's colleagues. Be transparent and communicative about the progress you make in the partnership.
- Make sure you commit adequate resources to the partnership. Once the agreement is made, it might be difficult to change this, if not specified at the beginning. It is always better to ask for more in the beginning and cut down the human and financial contributions if objections arise (of course you should then also adapt the scope of the partnership to the new amount of resources).



#### 4. The action stage

When all partners have the green light to embark on this partnership together, the real work can start. Most of what lies ahead of you is already planned during the reflection stage, so it seems to be as simple as doing what is planned. However, here are some tips to keep you on track.

##### Tips

- Divide the work in smaller stages so that you can tick off the different tasks as you go along. It boosts motivation to have regular, quick and visible results.
- These results should then be communicated to the partners involved and the colleagues or hierarchies in the different organisations, to keep them updated and involved in the process.
- The action stage will highlight the partners' capacities to work together and to turn the partnership agreement into concrete and successful action. The good practices generated by the partnership should be recorded for future purposes.
- On-going monitoring should be used to correct any unsatisfactory developments. Have regular meetings or reflections on whether you are going where you decided you wanted to go.

#### 5. Evaluation

Evaluation is not a stage in itself, but it should be part of all of the previous stages. Monitoring the quality of your partnership is needed throughout the different stages (information, reflection, decision and action). Evaluation criteria should be defined at the beginning of the co-operation and should be respected as stated in the partnership agreement. At the end of the action stage a final evaluation should be foreseen, involving all stakeholders (the target group, the partners, local authorities, institutions, etc.). The achievements and the quality of the work realised should be highlighted and the results of this partnership may lead to new perspectives of co-operation, maybe expanding the partnership or involving more partners.

##### Some suggestions for what to evaluate during each stage

- *Information stage*: Is my information reliable? Do I need more information? Where shall I get it?
- *Reflection stage*: Does the common reflection implemented fit each group's motivations? Are the draft proposals for the partnership clear and flexible enough? Are all the elements present?
- *Decision stage*: Are the partners' expectations respected in the draft proposals? Are the aims and the action plans realistic and achievable? Is the overall decision process satisfactory? Have we agreed on monitoring and co-ordinating mechanisms? Does the partnership agreement reflect what has been agreed?
- *Action stage*: Are the resources for monitoring and co-ordination adapted to the tasks? Does the work being implemented benefit all staffs within the partners' organisations? How do the target group and other colleagues react to the new co-operation? Are they informed enough and on your side? How is the communication flow? Are there any practices that you would like to repeat or improve? Does everyone respect the partnership agreement?
- *Evaluation stage*: Do we have adaptable evaluation tools? Does the project progress as expected and why? Is it possible for all the actors of the partnership to express their opinion on the work carried on? Does the project empower them to do so? Has the partnership achieved what was foreseen? What are the best ways to spread the results of this experience and improve further co-operation?



### Further tips when setting up a partnership

- Be clear on what you want and do not want the partnership to be from the beginning.
- Work on good relations between the partners from the beginning. Have some team building activities (going for a drink, excursion together, visiting each others' organisations, work or home, etc). Remember, you are working with people and not with organisations.
- Find a common way to manage all the information and reflection steps with the persons you work with.
- Do not be overly optimistic or unrealistic concerning your aims and your actions to achieve them. Be pragmatic. You can always enlarge an initial co-operation to a broader and stronger partnership.
- Bear in mind to always try to balance the tasks and responsibilities of the partners in all stages. Avoid one partner taking more responsibility than the others.
- Be prepared to face the different working styles and organisational cultures of your partners. (You can find more on intercultural matters in the T-Kit on Intercultural Learning.)

### Good practices – A concrete example

#### **An experience of partnership in training**

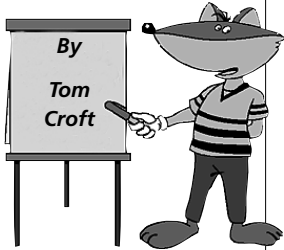
*In 2000, a pilot project was implemented between two street work organisations, one from France and one from The Netherlands, within the framework of the European YOUTH programme. French street workers went to job shadow their Dutch colleagues in successful projects in The Netherlands. The French National YOUTH Agency found the project promising and signed a partnership agreement on training with the French street work organisation CNLAPS. Together they organised a training course on European exchanges for twenty resource street workers, which led to several exchanges with young people with fewer opportunities. They hosted an international study visit, reflecting on street work in the different countries represented. Similarly, they organised a street worker conference about the YOUTH programme. Many new contacts and projects were established between street workers from different countries. As a result, the YOUTH programme is more and more used by professionals working with young people with fewer opportunities, a priority target group for the National YOUTH Agency, and on the other hand street workers found another tool to use in their work: the European YOUTH programme. The partnership was a success and both partners started discussing a new partnership agreement for the following year.*

CNLAPS: [www.cnlaps.asso.fr](http://www.cnlaps.asso.fr) ; [contact@cnlaps.asso.fr](mailto:contact@cnlaps.asso.fr)

French National Agency of the YOUTH programme: [www.injep.fr](http://www.injep.fr) ; [jpe@injep.fr](mailto:jpe@injep.fr)



### 4.3 Different working contexts



Whether you create partnerships or not (as mentioned in the section above), there is a great diversity of roles and capacities youth workers can take on. People working with young people with fewer opportunities may also be operating within a range of different working contexts. Such contexts can range from long-term commitments to short-term involvement. At either end there are advantages and disadvantages but they can compliment one another. As youth workers trying to work inclusively we need to be aware of where we are situated and what will be the consequences of the style of work we choose.

At either end of this range of working contexts are:

Short-term interventions	Long-term commitments
Often aimed at specific young people whose problems or situation has come to the notice of relevant authorities	Often community based and locally run and staffed (youth clubs, long running community initiatives or schemes, local volunteers or professionals who have lived and worked in the area for many years, etc.)
Undertaken by social sector professionals (social workers, school councillors or mentors, probation officers, etc.)	Usually non-professional or voluntary in nature
Commonly the result of a crisis in a young person's life	Open to all young people but sometimes targeted at young people with fewer opportunities
When the crisis is resolved support may end abruptly	Non-compulsory, freedom of choice for young people involved
A young person may have little choice over the intervention	Strong likelihood of being "owned" by the young people who participate
Although often necessary and important, interventions and those associated with them can cause young people to be hostile or suspicious	Offer opportunities and support to young people over the long-term
	Are often built on strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect between staff and young people

Building successful working relationships at the grass roots level is never easy and care and attention must always be taken to ensure that such co-operation is always mutually beneficial for all parties and has the interests of the young people concerned at heart (see previous sections in 4: *Young people and their context*).