

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on youth work in French-speaking Belgium



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Preliminaries

In French-speaking¹ Belgium, youth work is defined by several policies whose activities are framed by different laws that establish the purpose of the intervention, specify its limits and some of its modalities². A clear distinction exists between the youth policy (youth organizations, youth centres, etc.) and youth assistance (AMO, etc.).

The youth organisations sector was composed in our panel by two representatives of a youth movement (one active in the Federation of Baden-Powell Scouts of Belgium and the other in a local unit), four representatives of associations focusing on mobility and volunteering projects (MOB) (Service Civil International Projets Internationaux, Les Compagnons Bâisseurs, Jeunes Actifs dans le Volontariat et les Voyages Alternatifs JAVVA ASBL, Dynamo International) and one representative of an association supporting youth creativity and expression (CEC) (Bas les Masques ASBL).

“ So, like CBB (Compagnons Bâisseurs) and SCI (Service Civil International), JAVVA offers volunteering projects, international mobility in youth volunteering, international workcamps, CES (Corps Européen de Solidarité), and we are active in Belgium and abroad (Oriane, MOB).

We are a PPP structure, a particular pedagogical project, which aims to work a bit like an AMO. But with the objective of our project, to encourage the creation of international projects. Both individual and collective (Bertrand, MOB).

Bas les Masques is an association that offers singing, dancing and theatre workshops with young people. In citizen workshops, we allow them to express themselves in committed, citizen themes to make them also CRACS³. That's our objective for the moment, as it is for many of you... (Pascal, CEC). ”

¹ Or more precisely, two territorial divisions of Belgium, which are operated on a linguistic basis (that of the official language, i.e., the one used in the acts of the different public authorities): the French-speaking region and the bilingual region of Brussels-Capital. In these two language regions, the French Community, also known as the «Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles», is the political body that organises, supervises and subsidises various services active in youth work.

² Decree of 26 March 2009 setting the conditions for the approval and granting of subsidies to youth organisations; Decree of 20 July 2000 determining the conditions for the approval and subsidisation of youth centres, meeting and accommodation centres and youth information centres and their federations; Decree of 18 January 2018 establishing the Code of prevention, youth assistance and youth protection.

³ Responsible Active Critical Citizens in Solidarity.



● Our participants

- Dimitri, Fédération Les Scouts
- Martin, scout unit leader, province of Liège
- Bertrand and Giulia, Dynamo International, Bruxelles
- Oriane, JAVVA ASBL, Brussels-Capital Region
- Natacha, Service Civil International, Brussels-Capital Region
- Charline, Les Compagnons Bâisseurs, province of Luxembourg
- Pascal, Bas les Masques, province of Namur

Our panel also included seven youth workers, some of whom were coordinators, from youth centres in the Brussels-Capital Region and the Walloon Region (provinces of Walloon Brabant, Hainaut and Luxembourg),

● Our Participants

- Amine, youth worker, province of Walloon Brabant
- Roselyne and Joachim, youth workers, Brussels-Capital Region
- Emilie, youth worker, province of Luxembourg
- Béatrice, youth worker-coordinator, Brussels-Capital Region
- Naïm, youth worker, Brussels-Capital Region
- Smail and Driss, coordinator and youth worker, Brussels-Capital Region

Finally, two representatives of AMO, prevention and frontline services of the Youth Care sector, one located in Brussels and the other in Charleroi.

● Our participants

- Justin, province of Hainaut
- Axel, Brussels-Capital Region

This report is based on the reflections shared in the two focus groups to propose a reading of the effects of the pandemic and especially the effects of the measures to combat the pandemic on youth work in French-speaking Belgium, from March 2020 to the present day.

The author of this report is very grateful to the youth workers for their important contribution to this retrospective reading and collective analysis of an unprecedented collective ordeal, which has not spared young people and which has shaken up the aims and methods of their work. He is also grateful to the Bureau International Jeunesse, which entrusted him with the task of carrying out this consultation and its analysis, and to his team, especially Aurore Phan Manh Tien, who provided logistical support in organising the two focus groups.

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01.

The impact of health protocols on youth work



1. The impact of health protocols on youth work

A first observation must be made straight away. None of the professionals who took part in the two focus groups referred to the consequences of the pandemic on the physical health of young people or on their own physical health. Only one of them mentioned that some members of his team had been temporarily excluded for quarantine ⁴ reasons.

The statistics reported on a daily basis indicate that while adolescents and young adults are not spared from the infection, the after-effects are much more benign in these age groups than among older people, both in terms of deaths and hospitalisations.

More than the effects of the pandemic, it is the effects of the measures contained in the general protocols issued by the Ministry of Youth in French-speaking Belgium that have affected youth work over the past twelve months.

These protocols specify and complement the measures decided by the Belgian federal authority. They are applicable to all youth workers, while each of them is required to respect a specific legal framework that sets out, among other things, their tasks and the ways in which they are carried out ⁵.

For example, the protocol for the organisation of activities for children and young people in the context of the health crisis COVID-19 (red code), valid from 8 March 2021, specifies that:

“ Activities are conducted in bubble(s). Several bubbles, strictly separated, are possible. For young people aged 13 and over and up to 18 years old, activities are forbidden indoors EXCEPT within the framework of the protocol linked to school and social dropout. For young people aged 19 and over, indoor activities are prohibited EXCEPT in the context of the school and social dropout protocol. Outdoor activities are prohibited. ”



These age-based divisions in the protocols are hardly consistent with the legal provisions that define the terms of reference of youth workers in the three sectors we have selected. The youth organisations are aimed at young people under 30 years old; the youth councils at young people aged 12 to 26; the youth welfare services at young people aged 0 to 18, but the tasks of the AMOs (open-ended helpers) are extended to young people under 22...

“ All of a sudden, we found ourselves having to organise work without taking in people over the age of twelve (Smail, Youth centre). Thanks to the homework school, we were able to continue working with the under-13s. Fortunately (Quentin, Youth centre).

For example, we are going to do activities in primary schools, that is possible. But the projects for teenagers are still on hold (Axel, AMO).

When I pointed out in the presentation of our Youth centre that we work mainly with people over 18, it was not insignificant. The new protocol that our minister introduced at the beginning of February opens up the possibility of carrying out activities with eight people inside, but only if they are young people aged between 12 and 18. And there, the population over 18 years old, they feel a bit aggrieved and forgotten in this framework (Beatrice, Youth centre). ”

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The publication of these protocols required a lot of translation and operationalisation work that intermediary actors (for example, federations) took on and transmitted to the professionals themselves or to those who are in charge of the daily activities of the services and associations.

“ We put a lot of energy into translating the protocols because the difficulty with the protocols is that they address the youth sector in the Walloon-Brussels Federation as a whole. But this sector is particularly diversified... we can see it here, with the people around the table... and therefore, it was really difficult to know what applies and in what way (Dimitri, SC). ”

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⁴ Another participant, Axel, told us, some time after the focus groups were held, of cases of covidian infection within his team, at a time (mid-March 2020) when the activities of the AMO and youth centres had been relaunched by the competent ministers with the aim of combating school and social dropout. It is difficult, he wrote, «to respect the rule of teleworking in a social service that is supposed to stimulate projects with young people.» The various measures to combat the spread of the pandemic have been planned by the Federal Ministry of Health, in consultation with the country's other political entities, including the French Community, which provides the legal framework and subsidies for youth work. In the current legislature (2019-2024), all matters related to youth work, including higher education but excluding compulsory education, children and children's rights, are placed under one ministry.

⁵ See footnote 2

Things get even more complicated when part of the youth services activities are based on partnerships with other stakeholders.

• The combination of the respective protocols introduces too many constraints, which sometimes lead to the cancellation of the planned activities.

“ For example, we had a whole series of projects in reception centres for asylum seekers, so in another community. It was impossible to implement. It was very very complicated to combine our protocol with their protocol (Charline, MOB). ”

Maintaining activities while taking into account the protocols requirements is a balancing act, involving arbitration and interpretation of standards, which are also evolving.

It was thus a question of identifying “loopholes” in the protocols. In this «defensive» strategy, fuelled by the objective of maintaining a minimum level of activities, there is also talk of «borderline» practices, of «piracy», etc.

How, for example, can outdoor activities be carried out when weather conditions prevent them from taking place?

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The recent relaxation of the measures included in the protocols has given more support to the implementation of activities focused on individual support, which are more specific to youth workers.

Collective approaches to citizen mobilisation seem more limited and their implementation complicated by the provisions of the current protocols: the pursuit of collective activities, cultural activities and international exchanges seems more uncertain.



“ The difference between an AMO and other projects is that individual support is possible. And individual accompaniment is more easily possible by respecting the health rules. So that's great, it's an opportunity (...) There are fewer community meetings, but I still think that everything that is face-to-face is done more often, so there is something more dynamic that takes place (Axel, AMO).

Of course, given the conditions and the sanitary rules, we had to abandon the activities intended for large groups and limit ourselves to two or three young people, but we did multiply them to try to respond as much as possible to the different demands of the young people (Justin, AMO).

But afterwards, with the second lockdown, we mainly carried out individual work, with the loss of the collective dimension and social link for the young people, which leads them to a level of social and academic drop-out (Christina, Youth centre). ”

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This reorientation of activities towards individual support and prevention is supported by the fight against school and social drop-out, which has become a political priority in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation ⁶.

The protocol drawn up in this context specifies that activities such as: «individual interviews to prevent and combat school drop-out; individualised follow-up in small groups to prevent and combat school drop-out (homework school, youth centres, youth information centres, any other third party with a mission to combat school drop-out); individual or small group follow-up in the context of social drop-out (AMO)» are authorised.

“ Some young people no longer had the will to go to school or to attend classes through Zoom. But it's very complicated when they no longer have a social link, when they can no longer do activities, when their day consists of waking up, going to school and then coming home. After a while, it's a bit heavy for a young person (Naïm, Youth centre). ”

Moreover, the introduction of restrictive provisions and the succession of protocols required a lot of educational work with the young people, who were not immediately convinced of the validity of the restrictions imposed on them.

“ Yes, of course, we had to explain to the young people the reasons, the whys and wherefores of all these restrictions, because often we find young people, adolescents, who question these restrictions, who don't necessarily understand them and who often think they know everything very well and think they have infinite knowledge.

And we had to really explain to them the basis of Covid, what it is, and then explain to them what the restrictions were and why they were put in place (Driss, Youth centre). ”

⁶In circular 7983 of 23 February 2021, the Minister for Compulsory Education specifies the specific protocol adopted to allow the resumption, under strict health conditions, of activities proposed by extracurricular actors to contribute to the fight against school and social dropout. The Minister «strongly encourages the local initiatives and synergies developed in this area. Adapted to the specific realities of each neighbourhood and each commune, they offer unique opportunities to understand the experiences and difficulties experienced by our young people. These actors will obviously never replace the educational teams and cannot assume a role in the continuity of learning, but they can, for example, provide a place to study or offer a framework for socialisation and a bubble of oxygen during distance learning hours».



02.

The three stages of the pandemic



On 13 March 2020, a decree of the government of the French Community specifies the measures intended to limit the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus in higher education, education for social promotion, youth assistance, houses of justice, youth and sports.

On Wednesday 18 March 2020, an initial lockdown is imposed.

• In the eyes of the professionals on our panel, the time of the pandemic was marked by the turning points in the decisions of the federal government and the health protocols that specified them. The workers give the impression of having been swept along by the successive waves and their daily activity, shaken as if by a backwash.

“ Because for me, there are three waves: the first, from March until the summer holidays, when things eased off a bit. Then it started again in September. And then from September to December, we went back into lockdown. And then from January onwards, we started to loosen up a bit and then we came back until it was strict again. So we began to restart actions, and then we were told: well no, we need a protocol. And now... we are changing the protocol... we have to put other rules in place, etc. (Smail, Youth centre). ”

“ The impact of the Covid pandemic on our structure was experienced in three slightly different phases. The first lockdown forced us to completely readjust our work, to propose virtual activities via the networks, etc. (...) And during this period, we had to adapt our work to the new situation. (...) It was not necessarily complicated to keep in touch with the young people thanks to social networks, Instagram, Facebook, etc. We were able to propose activities that were a little bit different from those of the others. We were able to propose fun and interesting activities, in which the young people participated, such as a «Draw your Pokemonavirus» competition... We got in tune with the Discord platform to have online werewolf ⁷ parties. The young people got hooked on anything virtual during the months of March-April-May (Quentin, Youth centre). ”

With the summer, the pandemic measures are being relaxed, but despite this openness, some activities have to be cancelled.

“ We had to cancel some projects in the summer. We had a sports and cultural camp in the Czech Republic that fell through. I was supposed to go to the Belgian coast by bike with young people, to stay with the young people in different youth houses on our way. That fell through. Yes, there were these disappointments. But at the same time (...), everything could start again more or less normally. So, even for us as youth workers and for the young people, life started again. It was all in, we went there, we did activities again and everything was fine (Quentin, Youth centre). ”

⁷ See on this subject: <https://www.loups-garous-en-ligne.com/>

2. The three stages of the pandemic

For their part, the youth movements are authorised to organise holiday camps, and the youth centres have to respond to a large and motivated demand. Things seem to have returned to normal, or almost...



“ There was a second phase, marked by a fairly clear break for the youth movements with camps that in fact went on, in the main, almost normally. There were a lot of participants, between 90 and 95% of the usual number. The camps were spaces that proved to be very safe and secure. They met a real need on the part of the children. It was the first time that they had the opportunity to meet, really, physically, in more or less large groups, since there could be up to 50 participants during the summer period (Dimitri, SC).

We were open during the summer months, July-August, until the end of September, and it was great! Lots of activities, obviously within the framework. We felt that the young people really needed it and that this demand was enormous, intense: to come and see, to recreate this link, to take part in activities, to change air. It was really important for them. And the summer activities were amazing. It really was. There were a lot of requests from young people. And we were there to respond to these requests (Amine, Youth centre).

And then at the end of September, we were able to organise our reunion weekend, the only one of the year, and we felt like we were back to normal. Our volunteers came, as well as new people who had participated in the summer... We really thought we were back to normal. And then we were caught short again with the second lockdown. And then all the volunteering really stopped. Whether it was the one-day volunteering, the weekend volunteering that we still do well throughout the year in Belgium, with our Belgian partners, or the international volunteering (Natacha, MOB).

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After a resumption of activities in September under conditions deemed «correct», the second peak of the pandemic imposed a brutal break.

“ And then, boom! From October onwards, there was the crash again. And I think that the third time for young people was complicated because the virtual activities didn't work at all, we didn't manage to mobilise young people. I think that young people were fed up because they already had their virtual share at school, etc. I think that they were fed up with coming to workshops to chat on their PCs. And so we really lost the teenagers (Quentin, Youth centre). ”

This third phase of the pandemic, marked by restrictive measures (limitation of interpersonal contacts and travel; imposition of a curfew), was and still is, for youth workers and for young people themselves, the most damaging, due, among other things, to a certain instability in the rules in force.

“ You can feel that something has been broken and there you go... let's hope it's not lost... (Quentin, Youth centre).

And then, the third wave. Classes continue using online learning, etc. For young people, it's starting to get long. Young people are wondering: what's going on? We too, on the side of the non-profit organisation, the structures, are wondering where we are going (Amine, Youth centre). ”

“ Since September, we have been in a period of constant adaptation, with ups and downs, rules that are constantly changing. And so, what we are trying to do, on the Federation's side, is to ensure that the rules that are not always clear and that appear in the ministerial decrees and in the protocols provided by the Office of the Minister for Sport are as readable and as applicable as possible. We also propose practical answers to organise activities: for example, how can we organise activities in smaller groups when we are used to deal with much larger groups? (Dimitri, SC).

For international mobility, we are still in a state of uncertainty. And that's been the feeling since March 2020: not knowing what we were doing, how we were planning. And to have clear communication with our young people and to be able to reassure them, both those who were about to leave or who were planning to leave, and those who stayed abroad (Oriane, MOB). ”

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03.

Obstacles that have
complicated youth
work



● 3.1. A rather gloomy overall assessment

To describe the coronavirus pandemic and its effects, these professionals used the terms «fatigue», «exhaustion», «break», «distance», «isolation», «compartmentalization», «restriction», «frustration», «complexity», «perplexity», «uncertainty», «lack of perspective», «day to day»,...

And then, yes, the second lockdown, the downfall of this third period was really very very difficult. And for everyone. For the young people as well as for the animation team (Emilie, Youth centre).

“ And then, of course, at the beginning of the school year, the same effect: everything fell back when we learned that there was a reconfiguration, that in any case international travel would not resume. And this uncertainty brought back weariness. Hopes were dashed. It is this uncertainty, to know if we can send young people abroad, if we can welcome them, because there were requests (Oriane, MOB). The limitations imposed since October have clearly impacted the perception of the pandemic and its effects among the youth workers in our panel.

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In spite of the beneficial contributions of the initiatives taken during these three periods of the pandemic and likely to be renewed, the tone is therefore rather sombre: the measures to fight the pandemic have reached the very heart of the youth workers' missions.

● 3.2. Unintended benefits

Some beneficial effects for youth work have been highlighted: solidarity and exchanges between professionals; use of the free time generated by the suspension of activities to start a reflection on the «usual» functioning and its possible drifts; opening of new fields of activities, such as opening to the outside world and the local environment; new ways of organizing collective work; appropriation and introduction of the digital and the virtual in daily activities; opening to new audiences.

“ In the difficulty we went through, I don't know about you, but I found myself at several moments, like now, with other partners, other youth centres, to discuss our functioning and to see how we do it, how we function, and all that. And there wasn't all that before. There was much less of that before. There were collaborations, but there wasn't this interest in knowing what your difficulties are,... and I find that super beneficial, and so keep that later (Joachim, Youth centre).

But I think that if there is one thing that we should keep from what we have done now, and I think that it is perhaps one of the rare positive effects, it is that we slowed down, we sat down, we reflected. And I think that's something we weren't used to doing at all, because we were always on the go.

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“ You have to do a lot of projects, you have to have a lot of young people, you have to be visible everywhere, you have to chase after young people all the time,... And the fact that there was this kind of forced stop, I think it's the only thing that's beneficial, it's to say... in fact, yes, let's always keep one foot back before moving forward (Bertrand, MOB).

We have always done outdoor activities. But not as much as we do now. So, asking our youth what they want to see, where they want to go for a walk. That's something we're going to continue, that we're going to intensify, even if we can do activities inside the premises again. That's for sure (Emilie, Youth centre).

What we're going to keep is the organisation with the volunteers. We're going to maintain certain meetings by videoconference, which we didn't do at all before, but which makes it possible to avoid travel for some people who come from very far away (Pascal, CEC). And in fact, the lockdown forced us to train. We had to find Youtube videos that talked about global issues, learn how to do a survey, a word cloud, virtually, each with his phone, use an application that allows you to do a brainstorming, an online survey, etc. For everything that is evaluation, send Google Forms, do it live because we always had trouble collecting evaluations from young people after an activity.

After this pandemic, we'll go back to face-to-face, of course, but maybe in face-to-face, we can still bring a little bit of virtual. We were thinking of projecting more illustrations and images. To make a photo-language by projecting the images rather than doing it on paper. In fact, we trained ourselves and we brought a lot of novelties (Natacha, MOB). ”

“ We're not just going to keep the negative. It allowed us to really have a new audience with whom we can work in the long term. We took the initiative to do street work, which we didn't do before. The street work also allowed us to have this visibility within the neighbourhood of the Youth centre where sometimes, even among the shopkeepers, etc., we were totally unknown. We managed to have this visibility which allowed us to have a new public too: young people, children who did not know the Youth centre. As a result, it has been very, very beneficial for our Youth centre (Driss, Youth centre). ”

● 3.3. Destructive effects

For some services, the implementation of measures to fight the pandemic suddenly put an end to their activities: international exchanges, volunteer and mobility trips were suspended, postponed or cancelled; training courses for leaders in vacation centres could no longer be organized «face to face».



“ In fact, quite quickly, we were given the status of an essential sector. But the Board of Directors of our non-profit organisation was quite cautious, and as a result, the first lockdown meant the cancellation of most of the animation projects in the schools. And the school support, which is one of our big projects, went to distance learning (Axel, AMO).

The first effect we had was that we had to do an Erasmus + project in April. Since we were in lockdown, we had to adapt this activity as soon as possible and therefore, we had to postpone it (Naïm, Youth centre).

We organize two-week residential projects, with young people who all come from different countries. Last March, all our activities were cancelled. The summer period is dedicated to international exchanges, through two-week projects with young people from all over the world. This was not possible with the protocol that was imposed to us. If a young person coming from Spain starts coughing, we should isolate him and send him home. But then, how would he get home? In short, it was much too complicated. Thus, we «renationalised» all our projects, if I may say so... (Charline, MOB).

So until we get the green light, we don't send young people to the international level anymore, except for long-term projects like the ESC [note: European Solidarity Corps]. And for the workcamps, we got back to proposing only local projects, unless the authorities give us the green light as a youth organisation (Oriane, MOB). ”

“ Since January, we had hoped that all this would last a little quarter... We restarted residential training in March, but we are again forced to cancel. We are not able to maintain these residential trainings, so we continue to give weekend and evening modules. But we have lost the conviviality which is one of our values. We have the impression that it has been erased. So it's a bit complex. When the weather is nice, we think that maybe we will be able to do face-to-face meetings with four or five volunteers, or even six volunteers, as we did before. But here, in fact, nobody gives us the green light. Nobody (Natacha, MOB). ”

The suspension of interpersonal contact during the first lockdown, and then the limitation imposed during the second wave of the pandemic, compromised the continuation of the mission of some services. The prevention missions of the AMO were singularly complicated.

“ We could maintain the link with young people we already knew, but we as a prevention service are supposed to be out there just so that requests can come in. And it's supposed to be in continuous flow and there, we were operating on the reserve of public, our «faithfuls» (Axel, AMO). ”

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The succession of general protocols, which are not very or not at all adequate given the specificity of the missions of the different services, their successive modifications without consultation with the youth workers, the absence of dialogue and consultation with the local authorities (for example, at the level of the communal entity) raise a painful question: do the authorities really care about the youth sector? Would they also take over «non-core» activities?

“ The youth sector is more essential than ever. This seemed to us to be forgotten, or forgotten in relation to, among other things, the different protocols that we have had, each time incomprehensible, unsuited to the field. And so, to respond to this, we need to propose protocols that can really help us work with young people. For us in particular, we would like to know what will become of our international mobility activities. We would like to have a clear position from the authorities, from our Minister. This is still not the case up to now. We have been waiting for a year for an answer (Oriane, MOB). ”

“ I think that we have been very neglected. From time to time, we had circulars that came out, from the youth aid and that specified how we should do things. But we were always the last to know. It took a long time. I find that there was no support, except in the areas where we stuck together, like AMO, neighbourhood houses and all that. But for the rest, it didn't really work... (Bertrand, MOB).

It's the same with us. There was no more interaction than usual. We feel that we were really left out and relegated to the non-essential, like culture. We were not really the priority subject of discussion, and we were not invited to the discussions at all. So we felt that we were not essential (...) You can understand that. Maybe there were other sectors that needed more help than us. I think that, we could have been heard but I think that others would have needed it too, so it seems logical to me but here we are, we were relegated to the last ranks of the priorities (Emilie, Youth centre). ”

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The provisions of the health protocols collide head-on with the convictions held by some of the associations and the values inscribed in their educational project.

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The aim of a civic commitment nourished by an openness to diversity and plurality must be put aside (temporarily?).

“ Our work brings together young people from different socio-cultural backgrounds, different nationalities, and different social origins. And the whole effect of the pandemic and health precaution protocols is to compartmentalise the different audiences, to lock them into bubbles. So it really goes against what we do, our fundamental values (Charline, MOB). ”

This ethical questioning is at times coupled with a political questioning. While one of the participants considers it essential to be «an anchor point», «a reference point» for young people, others stress the importance of adapting to the constraints, while another wonders about the risks involved in limiting individual and collective freedoms.

“ So, in this complex situation, what can we contribute and propose? Remain rational and sometimes do the smallest thing possible, but continue to do so. I think that's been the watchword since the beginning of all this: to remain sensible, reasonable, to try to reassure young people in a context that is complex and not very funny, and to show that we are contained, that we are always present, that we respond to requests, that there is constancy (Axel, AMO). ”

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“ To describe the effects of the pandemic, it would be restriction. The fact of being restricted in our approaches. And to specify the response, it would be: adaptation. So, adapting our activities with the restrictions that are in place and that change as we go along, reinventing our work on a daily basis (Naim, Youth centre).

In a way, I know what I don't want in any case for the future: it's all this compartmentalisation that has been created, all these freedoms that have been a little bit hindered. I don't know if young people realise this as we do, but it was very dangerous, what happened. From a social point of view, breaking and reducing freedoms like that. I understand that there may be risks, but to what extent should freedoms be reduced? And the question is where to put the level, not me as a person, but as a government, etc. You can function, but until where can you limit people's freedom? (Amine, Youth centre). ”

● 3.4. An essential issue: maintaining the link, re-establishing the link, finding young people who have been lost...

All the professionals on our panel clearly and forcefully state that, in this period marked by isolation, withdrawal into the family sphere, the lockdown of young people to their rooms, etc., everything possible must be done to maintain contact and a link, or, if necessary, to re-establish it.

“ We have made it a point of honour to want to maintain a link with our volunteers, whether they are field workers or the wider volunteer management structure, by offering training and online events (Dimitri, SC). ”



Maintaining this link appears to be a minimum condition, necessary, but it is not sufficient. The transition to action remains a determining factor in the realisation of the missions and in the motivation of young people who plan to commit themselves to a project.

“ We have maintained our monthly meetings with our group of active volunteers to keep the link throughout the lockdown with adaptations, sometimes spaces to talk about what is going on, what we would like to do, what we would not like to do... It was a relief for them too, to keep this link. And then, at some point, this reflection wears out. Because the aim of all these reflections is to mobilise and carry out collective action on the ground. And when there isn't that, in the end, it's hard to keep going (Natacha, MOB). ”

The pursuit of minimal activities, aimed at maintaining this link, generates in two of our interlocutors a mixed feeling in the face of the difficulty, particularly during the third phase of the pandemic, of engaging young people in a process of reflection.

“ We had to abandon the project of carrying out a reflection with them, of talking about things that were a bit more serious, in depth, because it is extremely complicated to get them to do so. We have to stick to small activities that just allow us to recreate a link, a contact, to get them outside, outside their house and outside the commune, if possible. Going for a walk in Brussels for an afternoon, even if there is nothing special to do. Just go and see a museum, that's it. It's better than nothing, but we feel that it's very, very complicated to have projects that are a bit more in-depth, that require more thought with them at the moment (Emilie, Youth centre). ”

“ We always want to deal with themes in our shows, in everything we do with young people. But here, it was much more complicated because we felt that it was too much of a constraint. So we gave them the freedom to simply say what they wanted to say. So some of them wanted to talk about the crisis they were experiencing, but others, on the other hand, wanted to talk about lighter things, without any headaches. They also needed to escape (Pascal, CEC). ”

And sometimes it was a question of 'recovering' young people to whom the youth workers themselves had communicated the basic health rules. Workers committed to a community training mission, centred on the notions of responsibility and solidarity, could not derogate from these obligations.

But by dint of being repeated in the media and relayed by local workers, these messages of prudence and precaution have created a climate of fear and anxiety, which must now be combated...

“ To keep in touch with the young people during the first lockdown, we made a short awareness-raising video with the Youth centre Caméra Quartier, in which we presented the barrier gestures and a message: «Stay home». Young people participated in this video. ”

“ When we started up again in July, some of the parents did not allow their children to come to the Youth centre or to take part in a camp, because there was an atmosphere of anxiety.

We had to reassure them, explaining the health rules but telling them that there is no such thing as zero risk, that there could be a risk of contamination, but that it was important for the young person to be able to get out of their lockdown and enjoy the activities a little.

We had to reassure the parents so that they would make the children want to participate in our activities (Naim, Youth centre). ”

The need for interpersonal and convivial contacts is strongly affirmed in the testimony of a youth worker. Youth time is a time for meetings, friendship, shared festivities, discussions where we rethink the world...

“ There are things that can be done remotely, but we still lose a lot of life. You were talking about doing all this over a drink... When we have to put together the unit's staff, there has to be a certain understanding and if we do everything remotely, I don't get to know people as well as I would in the normal way. There are no bonds that are created at all. ”

“ For example, here, again, this meeting [note: Martin refers to the focus group], we could have all become very good friends, but that won't be the case because... (laughter from the participants) because we saw each other for fake, you know. And it's for many things like that. I know that I have friends who have trained in youth worker training and they have kept friends for life and acquaintances for life. For me, that's almost not the case. You don't see anyone, you don't interact with them 100%. And that's something that has to come back quickly. I hope so (Martin, SC). ”

● 3.5. A methodological «credo» undermined

In youth centres, the closure of the reception area, a sort of airlock between the street and participation in activities and projects, has important consequences for those who attend it, who are condemned to remain «outside», but also for youth workers, who are deprived of the opportunity to enter into a relationship with these young people and to «embark» them, if necessary, on a collective project, and who are led to reorient their approach.

In the case of a Brussels youth centre, the presence of youth workers in the street, 'on the pavement', seems to be inspired by a concern for prevention and control of certain potentially deviant juvenile behaviour.

“ From one day to the next, we were forbidden to receive the public. We lost communication with a lot of young people, because many of them did not use social networks and did not have access to computers. So quickly, we were very limited in what we could offer to young people. So the first impact was a breakdown in communication with our young people (Smail, Youth centre).

For me, the young people have drifted away. There is less participation and some young people who were more distant, who were reluctant to get involved in the activities, the projects are no longer present. We've lost contact a bit, because they were looking for the reception area at the Youth centre, which is now closed (Christina, Youth centre).

Before the lockdown we had a lot of new registrants. A big group of new enrolees who all came from the same school, who all knew each other, and they didn't participate much in the activities. ”

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“ Their main interest was to come to the reception and hang out with their friends at the reception. And then to go to the sports hall when we opened the sports hall. Whereas now, what they do is hang out in the street. They eat in the street. Here, there are shops, hairdressers... And unfortunately, we don't have many street educators in the neighbourhood... There were some young people who were a bit turbulent with the shopkeepers in the neighbourhood. Without being violent or aggressive. But asking a hairdresser: «What's the price of a bikini?» I think there are other ways of getting on with shopkeepers.

So, to put a frame in front of our youth centre, so that the shopkeepers and the people who work here don't have an image of our youth centre as the place where all the little thugs from the neighbourhood come, we did this work on the pavement. But we were already doing that before, and we said to ourselves that we were going to do it again now to be able to do this communication work in relation to the change in procedures and our way of working (Joachim, Youth centre). ”

The health rules included in the protocols complicate the implementation of collective projects: how can we bring together all the young people who are committed to them?

“ We build projects with the young people for a whole season. So these are young people that we see from week to week. And we have a way of working where each young person is important. The absence of a young person handicaps the collective project. When a character is missing in theatre, a play cannot be performed (Pascal, CEC). ”

Youth work operators who do not offer regular, daily or weekly activities, but more occasional interventions, face the same obstacle.



“ A little clarification about our audience: we work with 15-30 year olds, maybe a little older. And this public is not as regular as the scouts or a Youth centre. Our audience depends much more on the activities we organise. There are young people who will come back regularly but it's not every Saturday, every Wednesday, something like that (Charline, MOB). ”

The activities were maintained with an already «faithful» public, the protocols limiting the possibility of reaching out to other young people who could benefit from the service or integrate the proposed activities.

“ We made a radio... we created a web radio, Radio Canapé, to allow exchanges. And that was a great experience, but in the end it was only aimed at regulars. So it's a bit sad because it's a small proportion of the public we usually address (Axel, AMO). ”

More fundamentally, the unpredictability and successive changes in the protocols of the health regulations have undermined one of the methodological bases of youth work: the formulation of individual and collective projects.

• Proposing a project to young people, or working on it with them, would offer them the opportunity to perceive or identify their personal resources, to mobilise their efforts towards a precise goal, to exercise responsibility, to take charge of their lives or to engage in a collective process of reflection, creation and action.

“ To designate the response, I would say: projecting. JFG: Isn't it a bit of a paradox to set out on a project when we can't say where we're going? And yes... but for young people, it's important, I think (Pascal, CEC). ”

This methodological credo of the quasi-ontological value of the project is undermined by the need to understand things on a day-to-day basis. This is not without significant existential tensions on the part of youth workers.

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“ And in fact, what I wanted to say is that our young people are full of modesty, and the links that we can have with them go through the projects. And there, it was complicated, because there was no project anymore (Axel, AMO). ”

We can't look to the future (Martin, SC).

Another difficulty is not being able to plan for the long term. In our work organisation and consequently in the work with young people, it was more difficult to make this commitment in the long term (Christina, Youth centre). ”

“ For the team, there is the added stress of never being able to settle on projects and being on the go all the time, in anticipation of a new change or a project that is cancelled. Stress sets in because nothing is certain or completely organised. Everything can always change at the last moment. And that is very tiring too (Emilie, Youth centre).

When I hear «exhaustion», «tiredness», it speaks to me personally too. Because planning a project, cancelling it, bouncing back, changing ideas, starting again from scratch, etc. It wasn't always easy for us, as youth workers, and it still isn't now. We agree, we don't always know where we're going, right now (Quentin, Youth centre). ”

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● 3.6. A need for technical creativity

Youth work techniques have had to be adjusted, modified or invented, whether it be, for example, the games organised during the weekly activities, or the methods of organising distance training, taking into account requests for intervention from other professionals, or the media used to make contact with young people.

“ We, the youth workers, I would say that we have to change our organisation and the way we facilitate. That is to say, we have to review the games we used to play before, because we say to ourselves that animation is not possible because we can't introduce barrier gestures. We can't do that, because we can't eat, we can't be inside with more than a certain number of participants (Martin, SC).

In our training and facilitation activities, we worked twice. We had to adapt everything: our teaching tools, the way we reached our volunteers, etc. We work on the front line, directly with young people, but also on the second line, with socio-cultural workers, educators, teachers, etc., who were asking for meetings on topics such as the impact of digital technology on young people, etc. We had to design discussion and reflection modules and group facilitation to meet these needs. We had to train ourselves, «self-train» and then train teachers, educators, etc. in all these online facilitation techniques (Natacha, MOB). ”

“ We also had, during these times of meeting with young people and these periods of presence in the neighbourhood, a sort of bus, well a minibus, equipped with a meeting space in the back. It can accommodate about ten people. But the directives prevented us from taking it, because it attracted young people and we didn't respect the sanitary rules. So the fact that we no longer have this means of coming into contact with young people has also led to a reduction in the number of young people attending our service (Justin, AMO).

It was actually techniques that we weren't used to deal with : doing live on Instagram, for example, hosting on Discord. But we are not radio or TV hosts. We need a different background. One good thing is that we have trained and adapted ourselves, we tried to develop these skills (Amine, Youth centre). ”

● 3.7. Changes in the management and organisation of work within associations and services

Youth workers have had to take on new functions. Some of them had to develop a role as mediator between school and family, to find answers to the lack of resources required by the new organisation of schoolwork.

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“ When a teacher in the school sent me a young person who was often absent, I went to see the headmaster of the school and tried to make the link between the school and the parents. Especially since some parents, well not all of them... but some of them don't speak French very well, and so I had to make the link between the two to try and motivate the young person to continue his studies (Naim, Youth centre).

There is another group of young people which was in a certain precarious situation, which didn't have a computer and asked us if the Youth centre could lend them a computer. We were lucky that the municipality had given us its old computers, about ten of them. We were able to dispatch it to the young people, so that they could in any case have the means to follow courses or participate in activities on the Net (Amine, Youth centre). ”

Some workers had little choice. Constraints in other partner institutions have led their employers to assign them to other functions.

“ Our AMO is part of an institution that organises 16 different services including placement houses. The priority was to supervise the young people in the foster homes and to avoid contamination of the educational team and the children. So our department, like the other AMOs, had to be assigned to the foster homes to support the various departments. ”

“ Then, given the shortage of places in the existing institutions, we created a temporary SRU (emergency residential service) for two months. We went there in a second phase before returning to the neighbourhoods in contact with our population. We won't say that the young people who attended our AMO were left to their own devices because we were always available in emergency situations, but despite everything, we were no longer in contact with them as much through our activities in the neighbourhood and even through our various means of communication: telephone, internet, etc. That was the first time for the first part of the lockdown. Afterwards, we each reintegrated our services and resumed our zoning and contacts with young people (Justin, AMO). ”

Some internal functions were redefined, taking into account the needs encountered during the pandemic. Taking on new tasks contributed to a feeling of fatigue.

“ We rethought the 'out' post so that it would be complementary to all the 'in' activities, since international mobility had come to a complete halt, and for this post, it had a really big impact, not having international activity calls any more. We had to adapt, both in terms of the activities and the content of the jobs, because we are a fairly small team. We had to review the complementarity and the boundaries of our different jobs (Oriane, MOB). ”

“ We have created discussion groups on political themes and mobilisations, such as peasant struggles, migration justice and climate change. We organise thematic evenings to discuss all these issues, because just because there is a virus does not mean that these global issues disappear. On the contrary, they have been amplified. And so we have to talk about it. But we wonder: aren't we not doing too much? Or too little? As we have good feedback from our volunteers who participate, we continue to offer these thematic evenings. But the team is also running out of steam. Because we didn't sign up for this. Our job was to go into the field, to send and welcome people internationally. It's as if we had to talk about a world to which we no longer have access. It's quite frustrating for us workers. But how can we not pass on this frustration to the volunteers who, themselves, are deprived of this international mobility? (Natacha, MOB) ”



Relationships between workers have been disrupted by the effects of the pandemic.

“ Afterwards, in terms of team dynamics, we don’t see each other very often because we can be two workers a day on the premises. Fortunately, we still have face-to-face meetings, which keeps us motivated and we try to be creative to develop projects that can be useful for young people (Axel, AMO).

We have difficulties in managing the work. For example, with each change of protocol, we had to reinvent ourselves, review the way we work, review our organisation. In addition, some of the workers, in quarantine, were not present. As far as communication is concerned, we have gone virtual but we have lost those moments of cooperation that we had in person and which also allowed us to develop relations between colleagues. After a year, we are still motivated but we feel a bit tired, we are a bit exhausted from having to plan several ways of organising activities all the time, etc (Christina, Youth centre). ”

The postponement of these mobility and international-focused activities also generates a significant administrative burden, in a context of uncertainty and normative imprecision.

Moreover, the partnerships established with operators from sectors other than youth have been hampered by the difficulties in articulating the different health protocols.

“ We have a captive audience, young European volunteers, whose reception we coordinate. Four or five of these young people arrived in March. Two permanent staff members of our association are in charge of them and they have constantly taken news of them, animated them, given them something to do, since they could not do their voluntary project in their host association. My colleagues led workshops in which they sewed masks and aprons for nursing homes and other structures in the commune. They facilitated online French courses, conversation tables, because these are young people who arrive, who do not necessarily speak the language and who normally have the right to attempt face-to-face French courses (Charline, MOB).

We took a lot of time to discuss with our partners, to appreciate the impact of the pandemic on them. We had a lot of exchanges, international meetings, telling ourselves that it was not going to last, wondering how things would go if the measures changed, etc. We also had to repatriate some people to their home countries. We also had to repatriate people who had already left and agree with them whether they were going to stay or come back. So it was quite confusing (Natacha, MOB). ”



3. Obstacles that have complicated youth work

“ The first effects, in March, when the lockdown was announced, were the emergency repatriation of our young people first. Our efforts were first concentrated on it, because we had quite a few young people in Europe and in the southern countries. And then, in the uncertainty, we were, like everyone else, waiting. We cancelled our projects (...) Among our partners, abroad or in Belgium, many were not able to adapt their activities to the measures in force. It was very complicated because in terms of resources, nobody was prepared for this crisis and the response took a long time. In terms of training, we also cancelled everything: our leadership training, our intercultural training for young people (Oriane, MOB). ”

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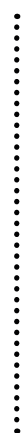
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The pandemic and its effects on young people and youth



As we have seen, the measures taken to combat the pandemic had the effect of refocusing the aims of youth work on an individual support approach, complicating the prospect of collective action, destabilising the project methodology that was the basis of the various interventions and forcing short-term adaptations of work techniques. Required to adjust their interventions to the health protocols, the youth workers are attentive and worried witnesses of the consequences of the restrictive measures (lockdown, curfew, limitation of interpersonal contacts) that have been imposed on the young people for a year.

Could the prolonged and repeated exposure to this new order of health rules have produced an effect of conformity, or even over-conformity, of these young people who have cut themselves off from part of their relationships and renounced their commitments within a youth centre?



The workers in several youth centres perceive the situation of these young people in terms of numbness, stickiness, withdrawal, lethargy, «generalized laziness»...

“ Some young people don't come either because there is no longer this collective space of reception at the youth centre, or because they have difficulties in socialising and have really closed themselves off (Christina, Youth centre). ”

“ What was sad for the young people was this break in the social link that they had in their group because of the lockdown, the curfew, etc. So the social link was really broken. So the social link was really broken (Amine, Youth centre).

Some young people who really need it are there, but we've lost another part. They rarely answer when we send them a message or when we call them. And really, there's a kind of lethargy, a generalized laziness, where it's very hard for the teams too, in fact, because we lose a lot of energy trying to motivate them. And in fact, it's an exhausting job, giving your energy and motivation to others, and trying to get them to receive it (Emilie, Youth centre).

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The resumption of school activities in September 2020, considered a political priority, and the imposition of very strict health protocols following the resumption of the pandemic, led to a massive recourse to digital resources, to the 'virtual' and 'remote' in the organisation of schoolwork.

This massive recourse has set the pace for the daily life of young people over the age of 15, with students enrolled in the first two years of secondary school being allowed to attend school full-time. It also puts an end to the initiatives of the youth workers who had re-launched the tested (successful) distance activities during the first lockdown.

With this second lockdown, or more precisely, with the imposition of restrictive measures after the summer period, the young persons were reduced to the condition of a pupil or student⁸. And the rhythm of daily and weekly activities was more than ever aligned with that of school activities.

“ Some young people told us clearly: «Look, Quentin, I’m already on video all day. I don’t want to spend two hours in the evening doing an online werewolf. I’m sorry. I’d rather do something else. And there you go, and I understand. But there was still this accumulation of school obligations (Quentin, Youth centre).

At the end of last year (2020), we organised virtual workshops but I’m not sure if it was the young audience that attended these workshops. I think it wasn’t specifically the audience we were aiming for, because young people are already so much behind a computer at the moment that having to stay behind the computer for leisure is a bit too much (Charline, MOB). ”

The importance of access to digital resources increased with the resumption of school activities and the introduction, for pupils over 13, of «hybrid» teaching, alternating courses given at distance and courses organised in class, subject to compliance with strict health rules.

The new organisation of school life was not always understood. It also accentuated social inequalities in the mastery of new codes, in the use of media and computer tools, in the management of (new) school requirements.

“ Some young people were completely lost and said to us: «I don’t know anymore if I’m face-to-face or if I have to be visual»... (Quentin, Youth centre).

For a young person who is struggling a bit, the return of a teacher who has been absent for two or three months is not easy to manage, because you have to increase your investment in schoolwork. Some people are really behind in their studies. And the famous digital divide makes this difficulty even more acute (Naïm, Youth centre). ”

It’s a curious reversal of perspectives: screens, which used to be anathema, are becoming indispensable school aids and, for the time being, precious aids for youth work.

“ For quite some time we have been trying to keep young people away from screens and anything new in the way of communication, and now, by force of circumstance, we are going towards this type of communication because we have no choice (Justin, AMO). ”

4. The pandemic and its effects on young people and youth

The universe of reference for young people under house arrest and «glued» to their computer or smartphone screen has shrunk and is limited to their bedroom⁹, which has become a place of «mental torture»...

“ The La Chaloupe AMO in Ottignies pointed out that for young people, the room has become the place where they were at school and that this lockdown has exhausted them. They want to be anywhere but in that room, because it is no longer that place where you come to take refuge but a place of mental torture (Bertrand, MOB). ”

But not everyone has a personal space in the family home. Youth workers pointed out that some young people did not have a place where they could isolate themselves... It is a curious paradox: it would have been vital for them to be able to isolate themselves when lockdown had cut them off from their social network... The pandemic revealed the persistence of social inequalities, and perhaps even exacerbated them: the digital divide is coupled with disparities linked to the quality of family housing.

“ This crisis has increased social inequalities. For example, they do not all have computer equipment, some do not have a PC or tablet at home. They may have a smartphone but no internet at home (Christina, Youth centre). ”



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⁸It is important to emphasise that the daily lives of higher education students (university and non-university) have been further affected by the health measures that deprived them, from November 2020, of most of their face-to-face learning activities. Their training was, and still is, carried out via screens.

⁹Testifying in a radio programme broadcast on the public channel (RTBF, Emission CQFD, 25 January 2021), a student, who is also a pro-climate activist, emphasised the shrinking of the daily universe of young students: «The room has really become our place of socialisation. Our school, where we eat, we do everything in our room. These four walls have really become the thing we know best for all young people. I think that young people feel completely disconnected from what they learn at school and don't even feel like students anymore. And I also hear that from my friends, that we don't feel like students anymore, because in itself, opening the Zoom or not, in the end, what difference does it make and then we don't have to do anything, we just have to stay at home in our bed, even in our pyjamas. So, in fact, there is no structure at all, we are completely lost and yet we want to be active, but we don't really see the point of being active if, in the end, we can stay in bed for the whole year».

“ There are a lot of young people who have internet, computer and everything, but they don't have enough square meters at home to be able to isolate themselves and be quiet, in fact (Joachim, Youth centre).

The digital divide encompasses a lot of different factors. I think there is the fact that sometimes they are connected, they have the right equipment but they don't know how to use it or they don't want to. And indeed, if they don't have a place at home where they can isolate themselves, it's difficult to follow... (Pascal, CEC). ”

The target audience of youth associations and services is not only pupils or students. During the pandemic, some of the young workers lost their jobs and were forced into inactivity. In a youth centre, a solidarity and charity project enabled them to find a form of activity and to renew interpersonal links.

“ Unfortunately, many people have become unemployed and have been plunged into very, very complicated financial situations (...) Our project is based on young volunteers, often young people who were part of the youth centre, who unfortunately no longer have any activity. ”

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“ In order to find educators with whom they are very attached, because we have a lot of very friendly links with our young people from the Youth centre, these young people came to us, initially out of curiosity, but in the end they found something great, where there was a very good understanding and it also allowed them to have totally physical links and not just through a PC or mobile phone (Driss, Youth centre) ”

With the lockdown, the disparities linked to the local environment, to the daily living environment appear more clearly. But these disparities, which separate those young people who live in more precarious urban neighbourhoods, those who have access to more open spaces on the outskirts of towns and those who live in rural areas, do not systematically work in favour of some and against others.

“ The word that would best characterise the pandemic is isolation, in relation to our young people. They have really been isolated. Whether in the neighbourhoods because there is a lot of social housing. At the local level, everyone stayed in their own neighbourhood. No prospects for the months to come, for the weeks to come (Smail, Youth centre). ”

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“ So the period from June to mid-October was a breathing period. We are lucky enough to have an enormous garden which is close to a natural area, the Avijl plateau, and we were able to organise walks and a friendly welcome in the garden, because our premises are quite small (...). So we are next to two huge semi-natural spaces, with completely wild parts, forests, meadows (Beatrice, Youth centre).

Compared to the city, where they can meet in the street, where they cross paths, here in the countryside, it's not the case at all, and it's difficult. On the other hand, at the first lockdown, we knew that they had much more freedom of action. In particular the boys who, in our country, are very manual, love to ride their bikes and motorbikes. Many of them have a moped. They work in the garden, in the forest, on farms. So at the first lockdown, it was quite positive in that respect. But during the second lockdown, with the winter, it was much more difficult. In rural areas like ours, they only meet at school, because in fact there is no street... They don't see each other in the street, they sometimes meet a little in public transport (Emilie, Youth centre). ”

Isolation and remoteness would have generated other inequalities related to social capital, i.e. the extent and nature of the sociability network. In the absence of opportunities for new encounters over the past year, would those whose initial capital was limited or modest not have been the first to succumb to the psychological difficulties generated by this withdrawal?

“ We also feel a withdrawal. There are young people who have been completely lost. The parents tell us that they have hardly left their homes, apart from going to school... they haven't left their homes for a year. They stay in their rooms all the time. Withdrawal into themselves, into their bubble too, family or close friends. This means that there are no more new encounters, with all that can be negative, insofar as there are toxic or negative environments. We feel it very strongly because we have lost sight of a lot of young people (Emilie, Youth centre).

With the lifting of the lockdown, we gave priority to street work. And that was a great experience, it went well. With young people who seemed rather relaxed, in fact. It's true that in the media there's a lot of talk about mental health among young people, and that must be the case. But in any case, as far as our audience is concerned, we don't feel that there are any big problems at the moment, but maybe it's starting to happen slowly. There are new profiles appearing in terms of individual requests (Axel, AMO). ”

The cutting off of interpersonal relationships or their limitation to a small sphere would have deprived the young people of the possibility of being listened to and of experiencing essential feelings, such as recognition, self-esteem and even self-confidence.

“ Even in the first period, they were more interested in talking alone with a youth worker than in really participating in group games or group activities. So we saw an increase in individual requests. Now, the particularity of the Youth centre that I coordinate is that we have a desire to decompartmentalise in relation to disability, both mental disability, sensory disability, and post-cure mental illness.

And let's just say that these people who have encountered a disability situation in their lives have all the more desire not to be alone and therefore to have an individual meeting with a youth worker (Beatrice, Youth centre).

By keeping in touch with some of the young people, we managed to involve them in activities that they practically organised. In these activities, which brought together several groups of young people, on Friday evening, a young person presented the activity (a blind test) and this was a great form of recognition for them (...) They were so proud to have been able to put this in place. At the beginning, they were a bit apprehensive but we were there to reassure them, to make them understand that we are right behind them, just in case (...) What they missed in everyday life, with the lockdown. There was no more recognition, no more contact, well... no more of that connection (Amine, Youth centre).

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Finally, in terms of public youth policies, this pandemic did not systematically contribute to setting up or reinforcing local synergies, although these were desired by youth associations ¹⁰ and supported by the public authorities ¹¹.

Several of our contributors deplore the lack of collaboration with local authorities, explaining it by a radical reversal in the way young people are viewed at the heart of the second wave.

While the commitment of Belgian youth in the fight against global warming had been appreciated and highlighted in the name of principles such as solidarity or collective responsibility, the will, even if tinged with utopia, to take an active part in social destiny, the discourse was tinged with darker tones a few months later. This same youth was then singled out for its lack of solidarity and sense of responsibility, accused of having contributed to the spread of the virus during student parties, of having disregarded health measures, etc. Could this shift from an image of committed youth to one of carefree and selfish youth, and the introduction of a logic of control and repression, explain the lack of collaboration between local authorities and youth workers? Or is the collaboration that is taking shape within the reference frameworks of local authorities?

¹⁰ See in this regard the «Recommandations de Relie-F à destination des pouvoirs locaux. Pour une politique locale de Jeunesse», October 2018, <http://www.relie-f.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Pour-une-politique-locale-de-Jeunesse.pdf>.
¹¹ For example, the project «Ça bouge dans notre commune», led by the Carrefour Régional et Communautaire de Citoyenneté et de Démocratie, <https://servicejeunesse.cfwb.be/subventions/appels-a-projets/ca-bouge-dans-notre-commune/> and supported by the Minister of Youth for 4-year projects (2018-2021).

¹² A survey conducted in April 2020 by Sciensano, the national public health institute in Belgium, showed that 16-24 year olds were the most likely to say that they did not strictly respect hygiene, social distance and lockdown measures. For example, among the participants in the survey, 13% of 16-24 year olds and 8% of 25-44 year olds compared to 3% of those over 45 years old said they did not strictly respect lockdown measures.

“ I wonder if the fact that young people were stigmatised at one point in the health crisis had an impact on some local measures. When young people were on the street, they were often controlled by the police. Since the local police are regulated by the communal authorities, this could explain the lack of collaboration with the youth sector (Amine, Youth centre).

Our centre is located in a small village, it is not a big entity. I tried to call on the local political representatives several times. And in fact, there was radio silence, even though I wanted to launch initiatives to try to pool aid, to bring all the associations in the commune together, to try to find solutions together. And there was total silence, despite reminders. They just told me: «No, no, we hear you and we'll get back to you», and then no more news. Obviously, I agree, we were very much neglected. It was very complex (Pascal, CEC).

We found this system [Note: the distribution of food parcels], which is a municipal system. That's the chance we had; we had support at the local level because I don't think we could have done it anywhere else because I'm the coordinator of a youth centre in another town and there it's very difficult, if not impossible (Smail, Youth centre). ”

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A youth worker from a Youth centre pointed out the inconsistencies of certain local responses to youth issues. He deplored the stigmatisation of young people, the truncated and exaggerated image given of them by the media, and a form of denial of recognition that surrounds the work of youth work.

“ There has been no police station in our neighbourhood for 25 years and nothing is planned. There are two street educators, there are I don't know how many Youth centres in this neighbourhood for 30 years. And the only strategy that politicians adopt is to put money into inadequate responses... Young people burnt down a crèche where there were social workers working in it, and the solution was to build a football pitch. So there are problems and the politicians don't understand them... they have envelopes, they have ideas, but they don't know how to manage the mess. And when we come to help them, there is radio silence: «Yes, you do your job well». They stroke us and that's all. And the fact that young people are stigmatised in the news to this extent is really frustrating. The media wrote that the young people threw Molotov cocktails. I don't know if people know what a Molotov cocktail is, it's not made like that, it's not a 12-year-old kid who can make a Molotov cocktail. No, frankly, young people have had it rough and I wouldn't have liked to be young now (Joachim, Youth centre).

In the end, the pandemic was not a happy time for young people... On the contrary. In this crisis, youth has been put aside quite violently, I think (Bertrand, MOB). ”

05.

Responses by youth workers



● 5.1. Adaptation, creativity, inventiveness, and proactivity

When it came to describing the nature of the responses to the effects of the pandemic and the measures to combat it, the youth workers retained the ideas of adaptation, flexibility, creativity, inventiveness and the ability to bounce back.

One of the speakers, a Youth centre coordinator, explained why she had chosen the term inventiveness and not creativity.

“ Because it is not only creating but also finding other methodologies. For me, inventiveness means the creativity of new methodologies (Beatrice, Youth centre). ”

Other speakers spoke of the orientation of their activities in terms of support, reassuring reference points for young people, a sensible and reasonable approach.

Two of them pointed out the importance of a form of proactivity, of a capacity to anticipate the constraints that might arise later, either to seize opportunities when they arise or to limit the risks when (re)starting activities such as training for holiday centre leaders.

“ We launched a project after the first lockdown: the creation of a board game on ecology, with young people. At a certain point, we had to avoid focusing so much on covid that we forgot other social issues. We adapted the planning of our activity, anticipating the risk of a second wave after the opening in July-August. We therefore focused on everything that had to be done face-to-face with the young people, creating the design of the board, and drawing up the rules of the game. At the end of the summer, the board game was ready. In October, when the second lock-in took place, all that was missing was the creation of the questions. We were able to do this via Zoom. We adapted our activity so that the whole creation part was done when we were authorised to receive the young people, knowing that the second part could be done via Zoom. So it was a way of anticipating (Naïm, Youth centre).

From the outset, we wanted to involve all the other training organisations for the holiday centre leader certificate in the process. We had a very proactive policy, by going out to find people and inviting them to come and see how we had virtualised our training courses. We also published a guide to good practice in online training, setting out how to plan these courses and listing the existing tools (Dimitri, SC). ”

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● 5.2. Solidarity and exchanges between youth workers

While our interlocutors pointed out the lack of systematic support from public, local and community authorities, others underlined the importance of the solidarity and support movement that has developed between youth workers, youth organisations and associations.

Bodies such as federations or steering committees initiated and supported shared thinking and initiatives focused on the management of the pandemic and the appropriation of health protocols.

“ The Federation of Youth Centres has launched initiatives such as the Coronavengers, etc. (Quentin, Youth centre). Our federation, with a very strong collaboration with the four other French-speaking youth movements, has taken the initiative to translate the rules into a language that speaks to our leaders, to our supervisors, so that the leaders have only one thing to do, and that is to concentrate on their leadership (Dimitri, SC).

In the difficulties we went through, I don't know about you, but I in any case, I found myself at several moments, like now, with other partners, other youth centres, to discuss our functioning and to see how we do things, how we function, and all that (Joachim, Youth centre).

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“ There was an exceptional surge of solidarity, but I think that in all sectors of social work, people were trying to see how others were doing and above all how they would cope. There was a lot of sharing during this period, in all sectors, to try to understand how we are recovering from all this and how we are moving forward in a context where we are being cut off, where we have to go digital when we were in a human context. For example, the AMO directors organise prevention meetings once a month, which I was able to attend (Bertrand, MOB). ”

● 5.3. The first responses: activities at a distance during the lockdown

In French-speaking Belgium, the entry into the lockdown on Wednesday 18 March 2020 was marked by the closure of schools.

Those young people who are subject to compulsory schooling are then plunged into a sort of educational no-man's-land, between forced rest, holidays, partial resumption of classes and individualised work organised at a distance for those who had not met the requirements of some of the subjects in their curriculum.

The actors in the school world are then led to concentrate their efforts on the implementation of particularly complex health programmes intended to provide a framework for the partial resumption of school activities and the organisation of day-care centres (mainly in nursery and primary schools) and on the formulation of conditions for the success of pupils. In any case, there is no question of a systematic and generalised switch of educational activities to a 'virtual' mode.

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¹³For example, an announcement made on the Facebook page of the Youth centre from Basse-Enhaive (October 14th 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/BEMJJambes/posts/3440215509428088>): «In these complicated times, the coronavengers are still present in the Youth Centres, wearing their masks. Because being able to get out of the house to meet, discuss, play, participate in the life of the association, make decisions together, debate, share, dance, draw, do sports, theatre, take photos, learn, move forward, etc., is ESSENTIAL!».

¹⁴ In the first instance, the schools will remain closed until 3 April 2020, but will still be accessible to those pupils who do not have alternative accommodation. Lessons and courses are then suspended. In the circular n°7515 of 17 March 2020, the Minister of Compulsory Education specifies that «homework can be planned» but that «the work cannot in any way concern learning that has not been previously dealt with in class; it must be part of a logic of remediation-consolidation-overcoming».

The lockdown measures are then extended until 19 April 2020, i.e. until the end of the spring holidays. Then the National Security Council (the federal body responsible for managing the pandemic at the time) extended the lockdown measures until 3 May. In circular no. 7541 of 16 April 2020, the Minister for Compulsory Education stated that «the National Security Council has not yet taken any decision on the resumption of lessons after 3 May», that «the Government has decided to cancel the external certification tests» and confirmed the arrangements already established for learning activities.

On 25 April 2020, Circular No. 7550 announced a deconfinement plan involving a partial resumption of lessons and educational activities. The safety of staff members and students is the «absolute priority»: wearing masks, soap, hydro-alcoholic gel, social distancing, limiting the number of people present, ventilating classrooms, etc. Notions such as «silo» - later replaced by «bubble» - make their appearance. Two dates were set for the resumption of classes: from 18 May for pupils in the last year of primary school and secondary school; from 25 May for pupils in 1st and, if possible, 2nd primary school, with a maximum of one day per week and per group, and for pupils in 2nd secondary school with a maximum of two days per week and per group...

In a circular dated 17 March 2020, the Minister for Compulsory Education states that «if the teacher uses online learning methods, he or she must ensure that each pupil in the class group has the material and support to do so under optimum conditions». A concern also emerges: maintaining a social link «with and between pupils». And a recommendation: «mobilise the technological means available to maintain [this link] around the work proposed, provided that everyone can participate».

In another circular of 25 April 2020, the Minister stressed that «whatever the channels used (digital, television, paper, other) to enable distance learning and whatever the quality of the tools made available, nothing can replace the teacher in the classroom, in person with his or her pupils».

Although supported by resources made available to teachers by the administration of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the «technological» response to the effects of the pandemic and the health measures that had been imposed was therefore both improvised and supplementary: it was not a question of envisaging a permanent alternative to the usual teaching practices, nor of overturning the school organisation, but rather of adapting it on an ad hoc basis, even if this meant devising extremely complex logistical arrangements...

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It was not until November 2020 that a more structured response, in the form of a 'hybrid' pedagogy making systematic use of digital tools, was imposed in the last four years of secondary education.

However, in the spring of 2020, youth workers were able to take full advantage of a virtual universe which remained a terra incognita for a large proportion of teachers, but which was well known to the younger generation.

As we have seen, they developed a range of activities designed to maintain contact with the young people who frequented their associations and services. In retrospect, they consider this period to be rather happy or less trying than the current phase of the pandemic. We have seen this, for example, in the testimonies of several Youth centre leaders.

The activities proposed may have been «minimalist» at first. Nevertheless. The young people were present. At least some of them.



“ What was really important for us was to have exchanges with the young people, but to have, like in school, a person in front of them who they have to listen to constantly. No. It was really continuous exchanges. We let everyone speak, without necessarily having a protocol for speaking. No. Often it was a bit of a mess. But it's also our job as educators to have to put a bit of... space, a bit of room in all this. Obviously, if we stayed with the logic of things, which was only to listen, I think that the young people would very quickly get bored, very quickly get bored (Driss, Youth centre). ”

¹⁵ In this regard, see : <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=28295&navi=4681>

“ We tried to keep the link with young people via these platforms, via social networks, because it was the only possibility at the time. It worked to a certain extent (Amine, Youth centre).

The particularity of the Youth centre that I coordinate is the desire to decompartmentalise in relation to disability, both mental disability, sensory disability and post-cure mental illness. These young people who have encountered a disability in their lives were all the more keen not to be alone and therefore to have an individual meeting with a youth worker. So, during this first period, my colleagues also tried out some... some werewolves via the internet, some group games. They made a lot of proposals, only to get a few really dynamic and positive responses on this subject (Beatrice, Youth centre). ”

Social networks were used extensively and the creation of an offer of «virtual» activities helped to maintain the link, at least at first. However, this «tactic», which had been tried out during the first lockdown, did not last long in the autumn of 2020.

• The protocols imposed severe restrictions on the various youth sectors in French-speaking Belgium. In the meantime, the summer period may have been a kind of enchanted interlude.

● 5.4. Holiday time: discovering the local environment

Faced with the impossibility or difficulties of organising international mobility projects, the workers of the associations concerned reinvested in their local environment.

“ We ‘renationalised’ all our projects, if I may say so... We told ourselves that they would only be open to Belgians... and despite this, we still had to cancel many of them (Charline, Youth centre).

So in the summer, we also repatriated ourselves locally: only young people 100% from Belgium. As far as the international work camps are concerned, we didn’t send any young people, we didn’t take any in. And out of eleven workcamps, we only offered three. The workcamps that were maintained were workcamps in the countryside (Oriane, Youth organisation). ”

The reorientation of the activities towards the local environment was appreciated both by the youth workers and by the young people who took part in these activities. It therefore seems likely to continue once the pandemic and its effects have subsided.

“ We were still able to carry out projects supported by the BLJ: we were able to go to Dinant and Charleroi thanks to these Minimob projects. We readapted our programme, but it allowed us to visit Belgium, through bike trips or other activities (Quentin, Youth centre).

What I discovered, and I was very, very surprised, was the new taste, the interest in visiting museums. Young people asked me to visit the Army Museum at the Cinquantenaire. I've been working at the Youth centre for 42 years, but I'd never been asked to visit the Army Museum! I organised this visit and it was very, very nice, because they asked lots of questions. We tried to trace a whole line of time through the Army Museum. And then, the day before yesterday, I went to visit the Belle-Vue museum and the Coudenberg underground under the Place Royale. I find it very nice, very unexpected. That's one of the beneficial and surprising effects of the crisis (Beatrice, Youth centre).

We did a lot of things outside and it's really nice. We said to ourselves that we would continue these activities and even increase them. Especially in Belgium. It's a shame, but we don't know enough about Belgium, and young people don't know enough about it. The outings we have been able to do over the past year have all been in Belgium. We always have international projects but concentrating on discovering places that are not far from home is also very nice and the young people liked it (Emilie, Youth centre). ”

● 5.5. The major project opened up by the second wave of the pandemic...

Redefining its missions or finding new ways of working with young people?

Faced, as we have seen, with the restrictions reintroduced by the health measures protocols, some of the workers feel that they have had to modify their missions, to reorient them. But isn't this rather a «new» form of civic education work? In the case of this Youth centre, it was a matter of mobilising young people in the realisation of a project to distribute food parcels. We will come back to this.

“ We simply had to redefine our missions. As we have heard over and over again, many activities have been cancelled. We pursued a charitable goal, at first, which was a one-off, but which has become completely established within the Youth centre. Now it has become a full-fledged mission of our Youth centre (Driss, Youth centre). ”

The political will to fight against school and social dropout has been concretised through a new specific protocol communicated to the different youth services at the beginning of February 2020. Although this protocol opened a breach in the wall of health measures and was an opportunity to 'relaunch' some of the youth work, it has had a perceptible effect.

“ Teenagers now only see the AMO as a place for schooling, although in principle it is one of our projects. Just today I had to tell an 18-year-old that he could not take part in a long-planned training course because the rules have just changed, and the course is only open to mid-drivers. The AMO is reduced to the school issue whereas in principle we should be dealing with much more: citizenship, projects, conviviality, etc. (Axel, AMO) ”

Rolling up our sleeves and creating new activities
without running out of steam...

A youth worker explained the response in his unit to the difficulties of organising «classic» activities: to design activities that integrated the provisions of the health protocols, considering it as resources rather than constraints.

“ We came up with a kind of escape game where the children have to try to communicate with each other via a walkie-talkie, but they can't pass it to each other. We're not allowed to. These are games that we might never have tried before. And maybe later we'll do it again, because finally the anime liked it. Some obligations are sometimes annoying, for example wearing the mask. We have to wear this mask. Well, we used this obligation in a creative and recreational way. At the first meeting we had to explain to them how to wear a mask. This meeting was about laboratory workers: we were like little chemists... (Martin, SC) ”

While the playful diversion of these constraints was appreciated by the children, the design of these animations is more complex and time consuming. The multiplication of activities in this format could ultimately prove too much for volunteer youth workers, who are also students and, as such, are faced with a workload accentuated by the reorganisation of teaching and learning methods.



“ I was the one who made this game for the main part. It's one of the games that took me the longest to think about and design. But we're talking about an escape game here, something complicated. There are much simpler games. Last week, the weather was great, so we did a much simpler game. We went for a walk and it was the anime that held the map. It was very simple. Sometimes you get motivated to play a game that requires a lot of preparation, but sometimes you procrastinate a bit more (Martin, SC). ”

Going out, leaving the premises to (re)find young people where they are...

Once back in their area of intervention, the AMO workers chose to intensify their presence outside the premises, as they were forced to stay away from their public during the first lockdown - they had been assigned to supervise young people in institutions.

“ How did we manage to rework the links with the young people and recreate the contacts, and be able to respond to their difficulties again? By increasing our hours, our zoning time in the neighbourhoods. We had to be between 12 and 14 hours of zoning instead of the usual 8 and 10 hours per week (Justin, AMO). ”

In a Brussels Youth centre located in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, the closure of the reception ¹⁷ had deprived young people of a meeting place. These young people had (re)occupied their neighbourhood, sometimes to the detriment of the peace and quiet of local shopkeepers, as we have seen. The decision was then taken to leave the Youth centre and have a presence «on the pavement», and then to reorganise the reception area, which is now closed, so that it is possible to establish an exchange with a single young person.

“ Two youth workers are in front of the youth centre every day, so as to be present on the pavement and to be able to tell the young people how the Youth centre works, because everything changes all the time, every day. To tell them how things work, to explain the programme of activities that we offer to them, individually and in very small groups. But that there is no longer a reception. But that they can come and talk, if they want to, with adults without making an appointment. We have rearranged the space and placed creative materials in the reception area. As a result, the young person is active and is supervised by an adult with whom he or she can discuss, exchange, talk about the last few days and the good and bad news... And they are very interested in all these creative activities [Note: these activities are linked to a solidarity project which will be presented in the following pages]. ”

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¹⁶By zoning, we mean actual presence in the neighbourhood: staying in contact with young people, establishing face-to-face relationships.

¹⁷The reception is a room in a Youth centre, but also a space for listening, meeting and freedom, without having to do any activity.

“ The two youth workers on the pavement look at the young people passing by. This is a small neighbourhood, a very small neighbourhood. In our Youth centre, there are about a hundred young people who pass by every day, but there are more than a hundred registered young people who live in the neighbourhood. So the youth workers work. We are next to the supermarket where they go shopping, where they pass by. It's an opportunity for us to see, to say hello. Just to have a contact. Because a lot of young people don't know that the youth centre is half-opened (Joachim, Youth centre). ”

The unexpected effects of virtual use... Or when discussing video games is more stimulating than playing...

The activities offered at a distance were not totally or definitively abandoned in the second wave. Prolonged exposure to screens, which have become the medium of learning with the emergence of a «hybrid» pedagogy in secondary education, has not been without effects on the mobilisation and commitment of young people in these «virtual» activities. An AMO speaker explains an unexpected effect of the transposition of a mini-football tournament project from the real world to the virtual world.

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“ The inter-district mini-football tournament project brings together four AMOs from the Charleroi region who meet through matches, four times a year. At the same time, the young people are approached with themes related to sport: the consumption of energy products, the sensible practice of sport in order to avoid injuries. With the corona crisis, the tournament could not be organised. One of the AMOs came up with an alternative: a virtual FIFA tournament, even though this type of activity does not quite fit into the philosophy of AMO projects.

But we thought that it could be a link and recreate contacts between young people, still with football, but virtual. We had brought in speakers to discuss with the young people the use of video games during the period of the coronavirus: how to limit dependence, how to use video games in a thoughtful and controlled way. It was a way of bouncing back from what was set up at the start, even if it's not an extraordinary approach, of course, but it's a type of adaptation in relation to what was proposed. ”

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“ Q: And how did it turn out?

Surprisingly, while we thought the young people would find the tournament too short, it was too long. After four hours of the tournament, they were saturated. But when we moved on to the discussion, with the idea of making young people aware of the need to consume video games sensibly, it was really rich, and the speaker was able to give them some secret tips: for example, signs of dependence on these games. For example: you play for one hour. They ask you how long you played, and you say twenty minutes. And this debate was really very prolific. It lasted an hour, one hour and forty minutes, something like that. And we even had to end the debate (Justin, AMO). ”

Does virtual animation derive its value from its playful potential? Or from its capacity to provoke exchange, discussion between young people, between young people and adults? Is playing online, as it is possible to do at home, really attractive when the possibility is offered to renew the link with others, through discussion?

One of the speakers from a youth organisation that has to organise online training courses because it is not possible to do so face-to-face, tries to mitigate the overly static nature of this modality of pedagogical work by combining the virtual with movement.

“ Q: A question, Oriane. How do you reconcile virtual and movement?

We propose energizers ... we play with the camera: turn it on, turn it off... The activities that my colleagues propose during the training put the young people in motion: we stand up, we draw. It's a way of encouraging young people not to sit still and to use their whole body (Oriane, MOB). ”

● 5.6. A first decisive element: acting for someone close and (re)known

In presenting the «solidarity» projects they implemented during the second wave of the pandemic, the youth workers highlighted the conditions they considered essential to get young people out of the state of numbness, stickiness, withdrawal, lethargy and «generalised laziness» that we described earlier.

One Youth centre has involved young people in a project to distribute food parcels, another one has involved them in a «Shoe-Box» action, and another in a project to make biscuits and pastries for the nursing and medical staff of a nearby hospital and rest home.



“ The initiative that we have taken in the Youth centre and that we find interesting is the food parcels, the foodstuffs that we had to go and distribute to a new public. This allowed us to have a new visibility because, as you know, a Youth centre is for people up to 26 years old, whereas the food parcels were distributed to senior citizens. This attracted the attention of the Youth centre, which initially had no interest in these people (Driss, Youth centre).

How can we keep our missions of solidarity and expression for young people and how can we ensure that young people can still meet up, but with a minimum, with a small group, while respecting the barrier measures? And we found this device, which is a communal device. That's the chance we had; we had support from the local authorities (Smail, Youth centre). ”

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¹⁸ Or «energizing exercises», used to energize an activity, to «warm up» participants,...

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¹⁹ This action was inspired by the «Shoe-Box» operation carried out by the Brussels non-profit organisation Les Samaritains, which aims to help the homeless and disadvantaged in Brussels (distribution of soup and sandwiches, hot meals, blankets, etc.). See <https://www.les-samaritains.org/>.

“ We had participated in the Shoe-box operation. And it worked very well. The idea is to put food and hygiene equipment in shoeboxes for disadvantaged people. This year, we proposed to them to do activities which were either artistic, or culinary or other, but always with this same system of kit. We prepared this kit at home. The young people came to collect the kit and then, later, via social networks, they could participate in the activity with all the materials. It could also be paint. We made salmon sushi. We did a lot of things. And then a colleague suggested that we do a solidarity project for a resthouse with which we had been working for some time. We used to organise visits every Wednesday afternoon.

And now, what we're doing is a bit like the Shoe-box operation, but it's more like a box of intentions in which we put a lot of artistic creations that the young people have made: key rings, cards with words on them, canvases, canvases with a small easel. All this starting material is provided by the Youth Ministry to the young people so that they can decorate it at home, and they are really keen. They need to feel useful. Whereas at the beginning, everything that is plastic arts, the young people were not at all interested in, but now, it's a big boom and we didn't expect it (Joachim, Youth centre).

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“ I'm going to tell you about a project that really fits in with the CRACS attitude, because it was really a solidarity project par excellence. I organised a pastry workshop on Wednesdays at the Youth centre. But because of the lockdown, we couldn't bake anymore. Everyone was at home. So to maintain contact through pastry-making, with the young people who liked this activity, and in association with an AMO and a local private person - a travelling restaurateur who, with his lorry, goes round the villages of the area - we proposed a charity operation for the nursing staff of the Chimay hospital, which is situated just outside Couvin. I asked the young people: «Would you like to participate in a solidarity operation for the hospital?». And the response was enthusiastic. The young people simply told me what they wanted to do and I went and put a box with all the ingredients in front of their door. I'd give them two or three days to make whatever they wanted to make, and then I'd come back to collect it all. I would put it all in the fridges of the mobile caterer who would take care of the delivery to the hospital. We also did this for the home in Couvin, a residence for elderly people. This solidarity operation was supposed to be just a one-shot deal... but in fact, the young people were asking for more: «Yes, Quentin, we can still make biscuits for the nurses, the doctors, the elderly, because we want to be useful and everything». And I thought it was just exceptional, because it was a beautiful mobilisation. We probably wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for Covid and all the support that goes with it (Quentin, Youth centre).

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Even if these projects have in common that they are based on an essential or «primary» need, that of food, this would not be the major ingredient in the success of this project.

The feeling of usefulness seems to be of primary importance here: the young people who literally and figuratively carried out these solidarity actions were recognised and their commitments validated and valued. These actions also involved a collective effort, through the addition of individual contributions in pursuit of a common goal. They took the form of a challenge, the success of which could be measured by concrete indicators: the number of parcels, boxes, pastries, etc. These actions were aimed at vulnerable people who were weakened or put under pressure by the pandemic: even if the young people did not have a personal link with them, they shared the same (trying) moment in history with them.

As a result, the ordeal of the pandemic left the sphere of institutional management and took place in more precise configurations with a close addressee: how to support the underprivileged or isolated people in a particular neighbourhood, how to relieve the nursing staff in a particular hospital, how to lighten the daily life of the elderly residents of a particular home?

Finally, these collective actions may well have also enabled young people to engage in 'offensive' strategies, with a 'positive' intention in the sense that they were taking action to correct a situation deemed problematic, and no longer confining themselves to 'defensive' strategies embodied in the respect for barrier gestures and social and/or physical distancing.

“ I think that what really mobilised the young people was the fact that they were making themselves useful and they really felt that they were helping. The youngest, the little brothers or sisters, would draw a picture for the nursing staff: thank you, good luck! Saying that we are going to support the people who work in hospitals and that we are going to say hello to the elderly. It was more the fact of mobilising for a common cause, because we were all together to support this project. They saw where it was and they knew what they were doing too, with the media and so on. So I think that's what really caught on. And in fact, the saddest part of it all is that we had to stop because we didn't have the budget. So, at one point, we couldn't continue to finance everything, because at one point, that meant about ten young people who were suffering, but that's a lot of chocolate, a lot of eggs... We had to stop it because unfortunately we didn't have the budget to continue. But the young people were keen (Quentin, Youth centre). ”

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● 5.7. A second decisive element: doing something with your hands

In the previous projects, the intention of solidarity is translated into concrete commitments, into «things» that are done, into gestures that require a certain skill. This move to action is pointed out by several speakers. «Working together and at the same time on a collective project or making an effective contribution to it on one's own seems to be a powerful lever for «waking up» young people or reassuring them of their capacity to act.

“ I found the activity dynamic. We were all together in the kitchen and we cooked for the homeless people. And the fact that we were working in a line, it allowed us to integrate the young people and to work with them at the same time. We all feel on the same level and that's what was a bit dynamic about the activity. And also to see that the young person was motivated: in addition, it was the weekend that it had to be done. And you can see the motivation, the fact of getting up in the morning on a Saturday, it's still the young people who are integrated... well, who are motivated by the situation in fact (Giulia, MOB).

During the second lockdown, we launched an operation based on small Christmas parcels that were distributed to about a hundred young people who attend the Youth centre. It was a letter-writing project: we slipped a postcard into their Christmas parcel, along with some sweets, on which we had pre-inscribed the address of the Youth centre, with a stamp. ”

“ We simply asked them to send it back to us with whatever they wanted: drawings, a text, photos, things they wanted, things they really didn't want anymore. It was completely free. They did what they wanted. The idea was to re-establish contact other than through social networks and to try to find new ways of communication. It was the moment when we felt very well that they were fed up with the networks, that it was something... the screens, nobody could take it anymore. This idea was very well received. We received a lot of cards, with photos of the Youth centre, drawings, song lyrics. A lot of very positive messages from them because they were happy to have something real in their hands, something not just virtual but something concrete to do and to send back (Emilie, Youth centre).

I try to give them creative materials, to draw, to paint, to do all sorts of things. We have made little bags with materials that we try to take to those who ask. One of my colleagues makes computer-assisted music, in the rap movement. He tries, but it's not easy, to create an instrumental base that he can distribute to different young people so that each of them can compose a text on this instrumental base (Beatrice, Youth centre). ”

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● 5.8. Risks and justification

In these collective approaches, the risk is to come up against the limits set out in the health protocols... The youth workers then had to perform a delicate balancing act...

“ It was a very supportive project that brought us into contact with a less wealthy and less affluent population in our community. And let's just say that it worked. It also worked for the communities, in particular for the Saint-Armel community, which takes in disabled people and is located very close to us, and for a home which depends on the youth aid. We also worked with the Red Cross asylum seekers' centre and let's say that if the young people were not really there as organisers, I would say that we opened up our theoretical protocol a little and, with the young people, we made a little decoration outside. We had put up lights, we offered cake and hot chocolate. And let's just say that it gave the Youth Centre a boost of dynamism and energy (Beatrice, Youth centre). ”

Nevertheless. The game is worth the candle, because by mobilising themselves in these collective projects, the young people were able to experience an essential need in their development, their blossoming and their existential balance.

“ I think this is the essence of being human, in fact: to be useful, to be able to have contact with another human being. I think that's the very definition of... I think we're meant to be sociable and not isolated. And so being able to help, to bring something to someone, that's really the essence of being human, I think (Amine, Youth centre). ”

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Conclusion

Conclusion: what we
should learn from this
collective ordeal



To conclude this collective reflection on the effects of the pandemic and the measures to combat it, four proposals deserve to be highlighted.

- The first invites a certain humility, because it is not enough to want in order to be able, and therefore the need for adequate support for youth work.
- The second suggests that, despite the hardship, the pandemic has allowed for some experiences to be initiated and built upon and has opened up perspectives for youth work.
- The third points to a central issue in the short and medium term management of the effects of the restrictive measures that have been imposed on the youth sector.
- Finally, the last one challenges an (overly) entrenched representation of youth and calls for a radical reversal in the ways of managing a societal crisis such as the current pandemic.

Creativity is not enough

In the search for alternatives to the usual ways of working, youth workers have shown imagination, both individually and collectively. This creativity is great, it could be limitless. But the implementation of these alternatives necessarily comes up against contingencies and material constraints.

“ Now, on the other hand, our creativity is no longer enough because doing singing, dancing and theatre outdoors is really complicated (Pascal, CEC). ”

From global to local

As we have seen, the summer period was an opportunity to (re)discover the local environment. This new or renewed look at the natural, architectural and cultural resources of the town or country left no one unmoved, neither the young people nor the youth workers. Perhaps it will be necessary to succeed in articulating this (re)emerging interest in the local and the importance of the return to cultural diversity, embodied in particular in mobility and international volunteering projects.

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“ We have always done external activities. But not as much as now. So asking them what they want to see, where they want to go for a walk. It's something we're going to continue, that we're going to intensify, even if we can redo activities inside the premises. That's for sure (Beatrice, Youth centre).

We have refocused a lot on the local level, we are now thinking about how to link local and international exchanges (Charline, MOB). ”

The relaunch

The suspension of youth work activities has affected the continuity of the service: young people have moved away, some workers have been affected by the coronavirus themselves. The constraints associated with the health protocols and their succession have generated significant fatigue among youth workers. The survival of some associations appears to be under threat.

“ I think that the issue of recovery will be particularly important. ”

“ If this year of the pandemic has demonstrated anything, it is the importance of what is done by all the actors in the sector of youth organisations and Youth centres, the importance of the benefits that this brings to young people directly, and on the other hand the harm that can be done by the absence of contact between young people and youth workers. And we already know that there are a whole series of associations that are severely affected by the crisis, if only financially, because they cannot maintain their activities or maintain links with their young people. We also know that there are some who are not yet in trouble now but who will have a lot of trouble when the activities are able to resume in a slightly broader form. So I think that there is a moment when a clear message must be sent by politicians who must give all these associations the means to carry out their missions (Dimitri, SC). ”

Young people are not the adults of tomorrow

When asked about the challenges of the post-pandemic period, Natacha, a youth worker and trainer in a youth organisation, wonders whether it is really relevant to postulate that there is an «after world». What if this way of posing the problem was the corollary of a representation of youth reduced to a form of social and political incapacity?

“ We work a lot on the notion of transition. For us, transition is a process. So there is no before and after: transition is already now. But youth is also about new generations being born, and it is above all with this generation that we will find the way to adapt. The question of the future was asked during the first lockdown, it was asked during the second lockdown and here, we are almost at the third lockdown, and in our team, we don't really want to ask it anymore. In fact, it's as if we had to face a shock but this shock was perhaps beneficial and essential. This shock has taken the form of a virus. But we just hope that the global issues that we were talking about before the lockdown are not forgotten, that we can realise the impacts that they have.

And for that to happen, youth must no longer be seen as the adults of tomorrow. They are already building things now (Natacha, MOB). ”

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The RAY-COR research aims to measure the impacts of the coronavirus health crisis on youth work in Europe. The objective is to document and analyze the effects of Covid-19 on youth work, and by extension on European youth programs, through questionnaires, interviews and case studies.

How did the actors adapt to this situation? What means have been implemented to counter the constraints of the health situation? What are the recommendations made by professionals? Several active members of the youth sector gathered (online) around the table to try to answer these questions. Here is the sociological analysis of the two case studies conducted by Jean-François Guillaume, researcher at the University of Liege.



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