

Final document of the International Conference about Youth and Conflict

## **TEN REFLECTION POINTS TO ENRICH YOUTH WORK IN CONTESTED SPACES**

From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2007 an international conference on Youth Work in Contested Spaces, organised by Public Achievement and the Direction of Youth of the Basque Government with the collaboration of Baketik, Arantzazu Center for Peace, was held in Arantzazu (Oñati, Gipuzkoa, Basque Country). Those who took part represented delegations from Israel, Palestine, Armenia, Northern Ireland, the Island of Bioko, Egypt, Colombia, USA, Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country.

One of the conference objectives was to debate and reflect on those key recommendations that could enrich youth work in contested spaces anywhere in the world. The work has resulted in this guide, which contains ten reflection points as recommendations. These are not closed conclusions. They represent a working hypothesis to be tested and experienced by each of the delegations present.

These bases start from the acknowledgment of youth as subjects with rights and responsibilities and as protagonists of social development. They take into account that they are applied in contexts with a great diversity of conflicts.

### **A. Principles**

#### **1. Give priority to human dignity and clarify the ethical base of youth work**

Youth work is an ethical practice. It is improved if young people and youth workers together reflect on and clarify the ethical foundations of their work. Basic to this is the essential importance of human dignity as a basis of any personal or social development and the defence of non-violence as a consequence of it.

#### **2. Encourage listening and reflection**

Youth work creates spaces where young people are listened to and taken seriously. It is improved when both youth workers and young people develop their listening and reflection skills. This should include a personal inward listening to one's conscience and outwardly empathising with others.

#### **3. Encourage learning through dialogue**

Every youth work initiative can become an informal community of learning through dialogue. Central to this is the importance of providing opportunities for young people to tell their own stories and to listen to the stories of others. In this way, we underline the transformative value that results from international meetings and exchanges in places of conflict. Intellectual growth is fostered through interaction between different people; including between generations, genders, sexual orientations, disciplines, historical perspectives, religions, cultures, ideologies, nationalities, etc. When these interactions are well structured, they provide the means for individuals to see beyond their particular situation, challenge their assumptions and come to new understandings.

#### **4. Respect and understand the lived realities of young people**

youth workers need to be attentive to the everyday lived realities of young people and respect their views of those realities, without judging. This includes the unique context(s) in which they live, their particular identities, the nature and history of the conflict and how young people are treated by society in general. Young people's contexts are conditioned by larger social structures of economy, government, education, police, religion, family, and the like and this is an important factor to be taken into account in working with them.

#### **5. Support young people to learn through experience**

The starting point of effective youth work is their own experiences and contexts of life. Through empathy and reflection, youth workers can help young people, and transform them into positive growth. Co-creating safe and free spaces in which they can question and challenge their social and political realities is an essential element of this work.

#### **6. Understand the tension between the real and the ideal**

Youth work is the embodiment of hope. Youth work happens in the tension between the lived reality of everyday lives and the aspiration for positive change. Young people need support to develop the analytical skills to understand their context but also to be able to imagine and work towards an alternative future.

### **B. Messages to society**

#### **7. A call so that social and political conflicts are dealt constructively**

Youth work in contested societies needs those conflicts to be dealt with constructively and to work on the causes and unjust structures that generate them. This requires a commitment to respect for human rights and basic freedoms, as the basis of any solution, to promote dialogue and negotiation as a method for conflict resolution, to promote empathy as a central skill and means of interaction, defend equity and pluralism as rules for peaceful living and to respect democratic principles and the freely expressed will of citizens.

#### **8. Defend the right of young people to be protagonists of the present**

We should not only treat young people as "future adults" but also as active agents. They have the right to be young people in spite of the context of conflict in which they find themselves, who contribute to society today, and they have the right to speak, to act, to participate, and to be themselves. Society, administration and the states have a duty to respect these rights.

#### **9. Youth work is not just about young people**

Youth work also involves educating broader society about young people and the rights, opportunities and channels of participation that they deserve. Society needs to listen to the voice of young people because the perspectives they have about the conflicts in which they live are singular and of great value. In this way, we take full advantage of their energy and their power to positively transform conflicts.

## **10. Professional support and development of youth work and youth workers**

Even though youth work and youth workers have a vital role in stopping cycles of violent conflict in contested societies, they are often over-worked and under-appreciated. Youth workers need to be supported by society as a whole and by the institutions in order to prevent burn-out and to continually improve practice. This implies financial support, opportunities for professional development, and the fostering of local, national, and international networks of youth workers.

Arantzazu, 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2007