

## Impact of the Corona pandemic on local network structures of International Youth Work

Central findings of a qualitative-exploratory study

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### Project background and objectives

The present study was conducted within the network "Research and Practice in Dialogue – International Youth Work" (RPD), in cooperation with the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg under the scientific direction of Prof. Dr. Anatoli Rakhkochkine and funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). The study took the Corona pandemic as an impulse to examine the stability of local structures and networks of International Youth Work (IYW) in Germany in crises situations and especially under the conditions of the pandemic.

In addition to the theoretical part of the study, which focuses on educational research on crises and social upheavals, the empirical part of the qualitative-exploratory study consists of an online survey of IYW-experts and a group discussion with six experts who have sufficient experience in the field of IYW to be able to report on past crises and upheavals.

### Key findings

The feedback from the experts and the results of the group discussion point to the conclusion that crises in general and the Corona pandemic in particular have diverse effects on local IYW-structures. In the following, some of the key findings of the study are highlighted in a thesis-like and aspect-oriented manner.

#### a) Crises-related challenges of IYW

- The following aspects were mentioned as key challenges:
  - the uncertainty of planning and implementation
  - reaching young people due to less face-to-face contact and the overload of young people with digital formats
  - the cumbersome nature of administrative procedures, especially in large and institutionalized IYW funding programs
- The cancellation of international meetings and stays abroad often leads to long lasting negative effects, such as a loss of commitment and the lack of transfer of knowledge and experience. Yet especially IYW on the local level lives from these very structures.
- The effects of the pandemic require a differentiated approach considering the diversity of IYW providers and their varying framework conditions and degrees of institutionalization. However, there is an overall tendency regarding the degree of structural anchoring of IYW: While the institutionally more strongly anchored IYW at local level is confronted with the situation that (permanently employed) experts often take on other tasks in crises (e.g. in the health department) and have to put their own content-related concerns on hold, the crises-related cessation of international activities and the associated loss of funding can manifest itself in threats to existence of less institutionally anchored organizations.
- The evaluation shows that the experts are concerned about the fragile structures of IYW in some partner countries and fear a collapse of these structures. Germany is seen as playing a central role in promoting solutions in the funding programs, but also in initiatives at the European level, in order to secure the IYW structurally and sustainably in the partner countries.
- Both historical crises and the negative effects of the pandemic are associated with a decline in democratic leeway.
- Due to the high costs of ad-hoc regulations and contingency plans, new distribution struggles are expected. The statements made in this context during the group discussion can be interpreted



as a plea for sustainability in the development of (local) IYW structures.

## b) Success factors of youth work to cope with crises and potentials for IYW

- The study identified the following aspects as key success factors:
  - well-established, long-term cooperation with foreign partners
  - well-functioning local networks
  - virtual cooperation opportunities
  - the qualification of employees
  - stable local organizational structures
  - regular digital exchanges among professionals
  - consultations through umbrella organizations of IYW
- The switch to and flexible use of digital and hybrid formats contributed and is still contributing both to an intensification of contacts between international partners and to the establishment of new (strategic) partnerships. In combination with an approach by the funding organizations that is perceived as predominantly flexible and pragmatic, it enabled a rapid resumption of IYW activities.
- Regarding the significance of the pandemic for young people's biographies, one strength of IYW

emerges: While some international activities cannot be postponed in certain phases of young people's lives (e.g. student exchanges), most IYW-formats can be integrated more flexible into life plans. The non-formal sector thus offers the opportunity to compensate for shortfalls in international school exchanges.

- In coping with the effects of the pandemic, the field of work benefits from individual and structural experiences from previous crises, which were updated and expanded in the context of the Corona pandemic (e.g. emergency plans). Small and large crises are even seen by the participants of the group discussion as an intrinsic part of IYW, as it always had to react spontaneously and creatively to unexpected challenges in the international context. During the pandemic, this manifests itself in particular in the development of innovative digital and hybrid formats.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

In contrast to previous crises (e.g. terrorist attacks, political upheavals, domestic conflicts), the Corona pandemic is perceived as a global crisis that affects all areas of social life and therefore IYW in Germany and in the partner countries as well, revealing the strengths and weaknesses of institutional anchoring. Overall, the need to strengthen local youth work and to work towards a systematic anchoring of IYW on a local level, as formulated in the access study<sup>2</sup>, is confirmed.

## „Research-Practice-Dialogue“ (RPD)

Since its foundation in 1989, Research-Practice-Dialogue (RPD) has contributed significantly to research activities regarding trends and future perspectives of international youth work. Research-Practice-Dialogue encompasses interdisciplinary and cross-organisational exchange between academia and practice in the field of international youth work.

transfer e.V. is the coordinating body of the network.



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## Working approach from RPD



Networking and coordination



Cooperation projects



Research and evaluation



innovative concepts

<sup>1</sup> Concerning innovative formats, the RPD network realized the project "New formats and ways of participating in international youth mobility" (2019-2021), which, through youth participation workshops, addressed the question of how IYW formats should be designed in order to align them more closely with the realities of young people's lives. Further information (German): <https://www.forschung-und-praxis-im-dialog.de/archiv/abgeschlossene-projekte/>.

<sup>2</sup> Between 2016 and 2018, the RPD-network initiated and coordinated the research project „Why not? Study of International Youth Exchange Programs: Access and Barriers“ (access study) to collect data regarding the access and participation of young people in international youth exchange programs. The study has been funded by the BMFSFJ and the Robert Bosch foundation. Further information: <https://www.zugangsstudie.de/access-study-3/>.