

**Bram Vermeiren (Flemish civil society representative and Director of Steunpunt Jeugd vzw)**

Dear delegates, dear colleagues, youth work practitioners

Thank you so much for letting me dream and discover today, thanks for letting me listen and learn from you today, I learned a lot and I take it back to our tiny country in Europe. I learned from you about the challenges and outcomes of youth volunteering today and tomorrow in South Africa.

The basic question: “what is youth voluntarism for?” is at the same time a fundamental discussion. Do we volunteer in various programmes or initiatives to learn skills, to be prepared for a job, do we volunteer for filling our portfolio or school curricula and/or is voluntarism doing what we want and like to do and benefit from it throughout our whole life. What do we expect when we move out of these voluntary programmes and initiatives, does an appropriate exit strategy exist? Difficult discussion. Is voluntarism only there for the happy few who can afford to spend time or does voluntarism mean a choice and a big opportunity for young people to gain confidence, skills and personal strength?

It is very difficult for me to address this because I think you as youth practitioners here in South Africa know best the reality and circumstances. So I feel I cannot answer these questions now. I can say that also in many youth NGOs in Belgium, Flanders and Europe similar discussions are on-going now. How can we motivate volunteers, what do volunteers expect from the organisation, How can we support volunteers. Does voluntarism just takes place to prepare ourselves for life or is voluntarism a part of our life, grabbing opportunities that improve our lives.

The only thing I can address now for me personally is that when I’m volunteering, I’m doing it because I can learn from it, exchange on it and talk about it with other young people and because I think it is necessary to do. It is what some people today in a working group shared with me: voluntarism is about looking for opportunities, committing yourself to them and do what you’re able and willing to do.

Since I was sixteen I volunteered in youth work NGOs. Perhaps it was because I had the opportunity and chances, but now I think it was because I saw the opportunities, possibilities and because I really like to be in contact with other people – my friends – to laugh, to have fun and to learn from them. To gain even more self-confidence. Now I’m professionally involved in the support of youth work in Flanders and I’m really committed and happy to do so.

That is also why I think it is really important to invest in a positive, people-oriented and a learning environment in youth NGOs, programmes and initiative as it brings young people together and motivates them. Moreover, it inspires membersvolunteers and staff to give their all in their youth work experience.

Since the launch of my organisation, Steunpunt Jeugd (Flemish Youth Support Agency) ten years ago by many youth NGOs, we have assisted and supported youth work NGOs which are recognised and funded in Flanders (Belgium). We assist, both voluntary and paid youth work practitioners in different ways.

There is an up going ambition of me and my colleagues: the empowerment of children, young people and their NGOs in society by sharing experiences and strengthening our daily work. And this is also what we addressed here today, tomorrow and in our practice: sharing good practices, exchanging interesting and innovative ideas and talking to each other on possible future direction.

Youth work, or working with young people means talking with young people for me. To have respect for each other. Not being a stranger to each other and thinking “was that somebody I used to know?” It means not only talking about programme outcomes, performance indicators and initiatives that emerge and are development by and for young people in youth work, but also about the challenges young people face in society. Unemployment, housing, care, are issues we face in Flanders. Youth work is for me is about the reality of young people and the environment in which they live and grow up. It means continuously caring about the wellbeing and happiness of these amazing children and young people.

Belgium, and Flanders is a small country. But just like here in South Africa, there are a lot of local, regional and national youth work initiatives who support, strengthen and emancipate young people. In Flanders, today more than 100 recognised and funded youth work NGOs to support the work of more than five thousand local youth work initiatives. Youth NGOs use many different working methods in the work by, with and for young people. It is a fact that you can't contain the different realities of children and young people in one working method or plan.

Only in our small region of Flanders (six million people) more than 50 000 volunteers commit [to youth work every week. It is voluntary youth work done by young people for other young people. It means about half a million of voluntary hours are invested every week in empowering and emancipating young people in our society through youth movement, youth club, playgrounds, youth services by and for young people. We have to communicate about the voluntary activities with our society. Let society know what positive and constructive things are done by young people, but also to talk about the reality and personal environment in which young people live and grow up today.

In our support task, our NGO resolutely chooses high-quality professional approaches and principles: a strong internal and external analysis, a SWOT table, policy and challenges, strategic and operational goals, and actions associated with the necessary financial resources and a realistic staff deployment. Based on joint training sessions and individual assistance to these organisations, the planning

teams of each organisation were offered and increasingly better understanding of qualitative and structured policy planning methods within the organisation.

And we do this by shaping our motivation and ideals.

My and our personal passion, energy and motivation are a key to starting point in what we do and the reason for the existence of our NGO. It is also to the question "Why do you do what you do?" When planning the future, the motivators of children, young people and staff play a fundamental role. By consciously naming and using these motivators you use people's energy to achieve the mission of the NGO. Exchanging experiences, talking about and reflecting upon our environment and motivators releases enthusiasm and power. Using this power form within results in spirited, energetic and creative policy planning, the right decisions and decisive implementation. In short, you don't plan policies because you have to, but because doing so results in enthusiasm and energy, which is stored and channelled for future activities.

Never underestimate the importance of a strong future-oriented strategy to illustrate the ambitions that you have and you may dream also. Dream today about tomorrow. Getting young people in pole position for tomorrow. Young people as active and responsible citizens who contribute to see opportunities in society and the community. Dream about empowerment and emancipation. Because the future belongs to them who believe in the beauty of their dreams. Design and be the change you want to see in the world, in society. Make a connection between your personal conviction, between the many dreams and facts and between all actors in society and government who are necessary to further develop youth policy.

After all, in everything you do, you aim to achieve your mission, and the mission of my organisation is to strengthen the position of children, involvement, motivation and lots of spirit!

Since it is my first visit here in South Africa, the past few days I got a small impression of the people of South Africa. I met people with a strong vision, looking forward and really willing and working to support young people in their lives. Open and hospitable. This is what I shall take back to my country to talk about it. It is already tomorrow. And off-course I hope to be able to come back to contribute to the follow-up of the outcomes of this seminar and take more time to visit and talk to more people!

On behalf of the entire team of Steunpunt Jeugd, I wish you tons of inspiration, energy and commitment in the upcoming work with young people and volunteers ahead.

Bram Vermeiren