

Young people at the forefront against injustice



**GET
UP
STAND
UP**

Casebook full of examples of **politicisation** by young people

Bart Van Bouchaute
Reyhan Görgöz
Peter Cristiaensen

COLOPHON

A great deal of people worked on this casebook:

The **study programme Social Work of the Arteveldehogeschool** and **Uit De Marge** non-profit organisation, the Support point for youth work and youth policy with children and young people in a socially vulnerable situation, have known each other for a long time. Central to the collaboration is the theme of working in a politicising way with and by young people. Uit De Marge non-profit organisation developed training and support for local youth welfare workers. For three academic years, within the framework of their bachelor project, Social Work students of the Arteveldehogeschool carried out action research into these practices within the framework of the Orpheus Interreg project: **Amina Bouslah, Lesley Dierckx, Elise Poels, Riley Van Hyfte, Fien Sleurs, Lana Gabriël, Marte Ingels, Shinya Xuan, Jeroen Kemel, Babette Träger, Lindsay De Langhe, Kaat De Smet, Charlotte Roelandt** and **Kato Van Hove**.

For other case studies, a great deal of people were interviewed:

The real Zohra preferred to remain anonymous (No sorry, no apology, nothing).

The British students from the case study 'We are not alone anymore!' also preferred to remain anonymous.

We based the case study 'LostWords' on an article by **Femke Kaulingfreks** and **Elena Ponzoni** (see also the reference list).

Katrien Boone, researcher and author of *Sociaal werk als armoedebestrijder* (Social work as a fight against poverty).

(At the forefront against what?)

Bart Holvoet, ex-employee of KAJ (Is this now the modern labour market?)

Filip Balthau, Ilias Aissati, Mourad Chiboub, Samir Taif, Ahmed Abdellah Aoulad, Amar Zougaghi, Edith Ward, Ayla Callebert and **Jamal El Kasmi**, members of youth workers consultation J100 (J100-meetings)

Jonathan Eggermont, youth construction worker (A fitness machine in the own neighbourhood)

Jasper Peeters, Pandemisten squatters (The city is for everyone)

Femke Kaulingfreks, Dutch researcher (#Trotsop075 (Proudof075))

Thiska Van Durme and **Andreas Accoe**, Jong Gent in Actie (Young Ghent in Action) (No child on the street)

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Saïda El Fekri and **Michaëla Sannicolò**, Safe Space non-profit organisation (A place to chill and much more)

Others contributed to a chapter:

Marlies D’herthoge and **Emily Mortier**, Uit De Marge non-profit organisation
(A fitness machine in the own neighbourhood)

Tina De Gendt, historian and story collector project de Vierkante Kilometer
(the Square Kilometre) Ghent City museum STAM (In search of migration heritage)

Peter Van Mullem, Arteveldehogeschool, Social Work (Options: offline or
online)

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Eri Park, Marcin Sklad and **Isabella Boere**, researchers at the University College
Roosevelt, held interviews with a number of social professionals in the Nether-
lands, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom (The role of youth workers in
brave spaces).

Jan Naert, researcher at the Arteveldehogeschool, contributed to the chapter
Power and counter-power.

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DREAMS OF A DREAM HUT



On the cover of this casebook, a bit hidden behind the title, you will see the contours of a strange construction. It is there for a reason. Although it is not the case that we asked our designer to cheer up the front cover with a nice sketch. This construction really exists. And no, it is not a water tower. It is a dream hut. Better: the ideal Dream hut which has been in Antwerp since 2020.

A quarter of the Antwerp population is younger than 25. Their voice generally does not reach far. This is why eleven Antwerp youth work groups started the J100. They brought together 100 young people, in order to think about the problems that divide their city and affect them. With the explicit intension to present the good ideas that grow from this to policymakers. Not once, as sometime happens leading up to elections, but on a permanent basis.

One of the many ideas of the first J100 top was an own place. A safe place for meeting and discussing with each other. A place to dream. A tree hut for example. Because city children miss that. And furthermore, when you sit higher, you can see over the city. High and dry, no one can bother you. Something big cannot be removed just like that either. Just like the voice of young people may never be removed from the social debate.

Ilias, Mourad and Samir were all three members of the J100 when the idea of a tree hut rose up. Today, all three of them work in Antwerp social work:

“ For years, we had to fight for this, this is why the Dream hut now feels like our ‘home’. At the top there are circular benches, so that we can listen well to each other. We can now invite policy-makers to this place – to our place. This is the key to a safe way of starting a dialogue. The idea appeared to be a seed which has meanwhile grown into a flower. That flower produces new seeds in turn. New dreams.

Further on in this casebook, you will read more about that J100. But for us the Dream hut is the symbol for what this book is about. For what ‘politicisation’ is about.

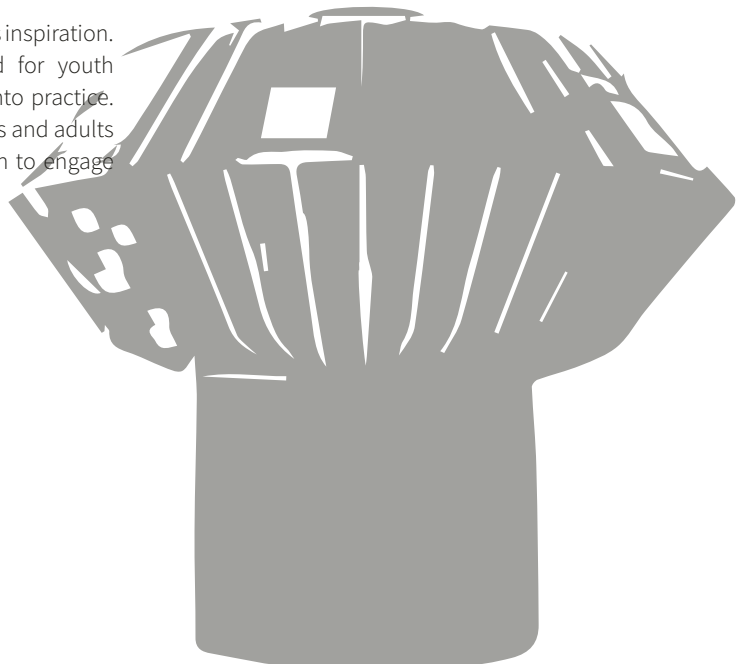
All young people deserve a place – literally and figuratively – where they can allow their voice to be heard. Youth workers can support them with this.

All young people deserve a dream hut.

This book has the ambition to emphasize the importance of this via a whole series of practical examples. Every society has small and large forms of injustice. Young people come across that. It is important that they make that injustice visible. And it is also important that they receive our support in this. That we are on their side in their fight against injustice.

We wrote this book on the basis of this inspiration. It is in the first instance intended for youth workers who wish to put this idea into practice. But it is also aimed at all young adults and adults who support young people and wish to engage together with them.

www.j100.be/droomhut





Amina Bouslah, Lesley Dierckx, Elise Poels, Riley Van Hyfte,
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**NO SORRY,
NO APOLOGY,
NOTHING**



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The story of Zohra* began with a long search for a student job. Like many teenagers, she wanted to be independent and earn her own money. But if you wear a headscarf, that is not easy. When she heard that a supermarket in her neighbourhood was going to open a new branch, it was a dream to work there. For them a headscarf is indeed allowed, she had read that in the official work regulations. The application process went really smoothly and she received a contract via a temporary office.

She was allowed to start on a Monday. She was enthusiastic, but also extremely nervous. She was welcomed very positively and was given work clothing and a locker. Until the boss suddenly asked her to remove her headscarf. Her world stood still for a moment. First, she did not realise properly what he had said. She asked if he could repeat it, but she had indeed understood him properly. Everything happened in the presence of other employees. She asked her boss if she could call her mother. She felt so alone and kept her tears in. When she returned and told him that she would no longer be able to work, the only thing he did was nod. No sorry, no apology, nothing.

In order to express her sorrow and to warn friends who had also applied for work, she decided to share her story on Instagram. She did not want them to experience the same thing as her. But before she realised it, her story went viral. Her Instagram account is private but her story was soon shared on Facebook groups and on Twitter. Two days later, she was interviewed by the local television and she was in a newspaper. She received a great deal of support from family, friends and strangers. But negative responses also appeared on social media. That she was exaggerating, or that she should conform to the rules. The local television had to remove a great deal of racist responses from its website. Months later, she had still not heard anything from the local operators of the supermarket. No apology, absolutely nothing.

* Zohra is a fictitious name, but the story is based on real events.

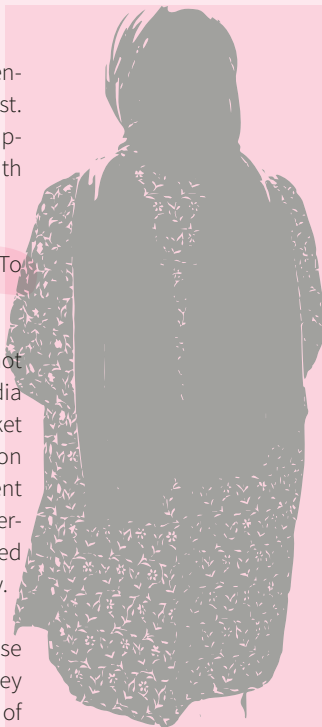
There are many stories like this. Young people encounter situations which they consider as unjust. Often, they do not know how to react. Things happen without anyone caring. How many girls with a headscarf were already in Zohra's situation?

But now and again anger leads to a reaction. To action.

Sometimes **unconscious**, like Zohra who did not have the intention at all of ending up in a media storm. The spokesperson for the supermarket chain confirmed to the newspaper that the vision of the local branch holder was not consistent with that of the group and that they would intervene. She also contacted Zohra, but she decided not to take up the offer of starting work anyway.

Sometimes the reaction is **deliberate**. Because it becomes too much for young people and they shout out their anger. With or without the help of friends, sometimes of youth workers.

When they affect society with the expression of their grievances, we call that examples of **'politicisation'**.



POLITICISATION

Spontaneously, you could bring ‘politicisation’ in connection with ‘politics’. Is politicisation bringing young people closer to politics or signalling their needs and requirements to politicians?

Absolutely not!

We certainly do not see politics as a closed domain within which a few professional politicians are engaged. Politics are everywhere where people think, discuss together, agree or disagree with each other and make proposals about the way in which we wish to live together. Everything and everyone can therefore be part of political processes at any time.

With a result that everyone can ‘do politics’!

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY POLITICISATION?

Politicisation are all the initiatives that people take to make certain matters ‘public’. All the actions that they undertake to bring attention to forms of injustice that they encounter and to throw these into the public debate.

Zohra ended up in the media storm when she challenged on her Instagram account how the operator of the local supermarket did not value his own rule. Even if it was not her intention initially, she politicised the matter of wearing a headscarf on the shopfloor and the consequences for girls like her, who want to be independent.

So politicisation is not a new word for policy-targeted working. When as a youth worker you start to lobby in a concrete file or ensure the granting of rights, that is of course very valuable. But we therefore still do not call that ‘politicising’. After all, these interventions work under the radar, behind the scenes. They lack the public character that is essential for politicisation.

Anyone who politicises just searches for **that public debate**. Although not always consciously and strategically thought out, like the example of Zohra shows. And it does not always have to be a demonstration, as you would perhaps spontaneously think. On the contrary, politicisation can take many forms.

THE EXISTING ORDER

When someone makes a particular matter public, that usually means that existing rules or images are questioned. The underlying power relations are disrupted. To be more concise: politicising actions unavoidably question 'the existing order'. They often disrupt that too.

'The existing order' is a concept which we have borrowed from the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. With this, he points to the division of positions present in society, the prevailing imaging for groups or the common ways of dealing with matters. Usually, we do not dwell on that and a majority within society finds this existing order very normal.

At the same time, we must realise that every existing order – even if it is the intention to be honest and just – unavoidably entails forms of inequality, exclusion and injustice. Politicisation then points to these moments when the existing order is questioned.



Anyone who politicises searches for the public debate and disrupts the existing power relations.

EVERYONE CAN POLITICISE

Politicisation is possible in **many different ways, moments and places**. People can enter into the public debate with policymakers, but just the same with a school board, a welfare facility or a project developer.

Politicisation can also entail many different types of actions and activities. Some people choose to work on awareness, others take action about concrete demands or go against the negative imaging about a group or a neighbourhood. Yet others set up new practices themselves which show on a small scale that a particular change is really possible.

Borne out by the many examples in this casebook.

A logical consequence of this broad definition is that everyone can politicise.

Children and young people too!

Everyone has the right to bring a matter into the social debate. This starting point was based on the vision of democracy which we also found with the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. Usually, we think with 'democracy' of a system with elections, representatives, separation of powers and so on. But here we see **democracy**

as a starting point. This starting point says that everyone has the same right to speak about how we give shape to our society. This is certainly a challenging thought.

At strong moments of politicisation, matters are made visible, people step out from the shadow. Voices which have not yet been heard become audible. They too have as much right to take part on an equal footing in the discussion about our society.

For children and young people, this is undoubtedly very recognisable. All too often, they are protected with their young age. They cannot be capable and are not treated on the same footing, as equal fellow citizens. They are reportedly still too naive, still have a lot to learn, also what democracy is.

But 'democracy' as a principle is at odds with this. Democracy departs from the assumption that everyone, without limitation, as an equal, can say something about our society. It is therefore not the case because they are 'just' children or young people, that they have nothing to say. Practices of politicisation ensure that the existing order which pushes them away or silences them, is broken open.

A LIVELY DEMOCRACY

A lively democracy needs people who question the existing situation and point to shortcomings. This is why democratic governments and institutions do not impede or slow down these practices but just **embrace them and stimulate them actively**. And this may work very disruptively according to the existing facilities, the existing procedures or the existing relations.

Politicisation by young people can 'raise hell'. But that must be possible within a vibrant democracy.

It is even necessary.

A democracy which does not permit its young people to challenge situations and demand change is not worth the name of democracy. Dissatisfaction will always exist, and fast results seldom. A democratic society is by definition unfinished and imperfect, but it must be constantly open to people who remind us of the ultimate promise of democracy: that we are all equal and free citizens.

*Politicisation by young
people can 'raise hell'.
But that must be
possible within a vibrant
democracy.*



2

AT THE FOREFRONT AGAINST WHAT?

Fien Sleurs, Lana Gabriël, Bart Van Bouchaute,
Reyhan Görgöz en Peter Cristiaensen

WE ARE NOT ALONE ANYMORE!

In 2020 an English University decided to explore one of the most prevalent issues across most UK Universities: The Black, Asian, Minority Ethnicities awarding gap (also known as Diverse Ethnicities awarding gap; formerly known as BAME attainment gap). This refers to an existing gap between diverse ethnic student's performance versus their White counterparts, whereby diverse ethnic students are underperforming in higher education. However, the reasons for this are complex and one that many Universities have not yet challenged nor explored.

However, a particular University decided to challenge this gap. They initiated an ambassador program, suggested by a former student officer, whereby diverse ethnic students were employed to help the University examine the awarding gap. "The reason why I wanted to become an ambassador was to represent former and current refugees. They are not recognised at all at the university. I came to the UK as a refugee myself and I want to give them a voice."



dors decided to organise an online student forum with a threefold aim, namely: 1) to raise awareness of the diverse ethnicities awarding gap; 2) to create and provide a safe space from students to share their experiences in higher education without the fear of facing consequences; and 3) to utilise the student's voices and make a difference within the University.

The students **shared** their stories and **experiences**, which brought the group closer as some experiences were common amongst the group. The group shared sadness, frustration but joy as well, as they no longer felt alone. Gradually, the students noticed that their problems were shared amongst many of their diverse ethnic peers at the University. The awareness of structural injustice became more apparent, as did the group's desire to do something about it.

The ambassadors decided to start a student petition. They organised an extensive document outlining the need for a zero-tolerance policy to racism. The document was then spread to other students, thanks to the help of the student union. If the policy gained enough attention and signatures, the University had no choice than to implement the policy. And this is exactly what happened. Thanks to the majority of the signatures being in favour of the policy, the policy came into power.

With that said, metaphorically, the official policy is stuffed deep in a drawer, locked away from students, where its existence is unknown. Ironically, the following months, the University organised a "Stand Up to Racism" campaign whereby for one day only, all staff and students were encouraged to wear the colour red to symbolise the fight against racism... yet the University refused to implement a zero-tolerance to racism policy

months before this campaign, and continues to refuse to take concrete measure to tackle institutional racism and discrimination.

“ They make a lot of fake gestures to show on the surface that they are against racism, but they do not have a policy that pursues and encourages zero-tolerance towards racism. They are not at all willing to address certain racism issues: representation of diverse ethnicities in personnel policies, complaint procedures, etc ...

Yet the students feel they have achieved a great deal:

“ We changed the tone, focus and language of the debate and managed to raise awareness among the students. We proactively thought of concrete measures to achieve zero-tolerance and obtained a number of points, such as a scholarship for refugees with the help of some amazing staff at our University. The ambassador project, originally intended to run for one year, has continued and a former ambassador is now training a new group of ambassadors.

The call for recognition and equality among students remains strong. The new ambassadors are committed to ongoing awareness and new actions. To be continued.

(THE BRITISH STUDENTS FROM THIS AMBASSADOR PROJECT PREFERRED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS)

WHAT INJUSTICE? WHICH INJUSTICE?

Children and young people have, like everyone, the right to stir in the social pot.

To politicise the injustice which they encounter. To shout out that structural forms of racism and discrimination definitely play a role at their British university.

The American political philosopher Nancy Fraser calls this '**equality of participation**'. For her, this is the essence of social justice. A just society is only possible if every member can participate on an equal footing in all domains of social life.

This is the dream scenario. But the obstacles are numerous.

Fraser makes a distinction between **THREE DOMAINS OF INJUSTICE**

1 . Economic injustice: the material prosperity in our society is very unevenly distributed. Think of income, housing, the wage gap between men and women, etc.

2 . Cultural injustice: not everyone enjoys the same recognition or appreciation. Some groups are considered as inferior, such as the LGBTQ community or people with a different ethnic-cultural background, but likewise people in poverty.

3 . Political injustice: not everyone's voice reaches as far in our society, can take

part in political processes fully or feels represented within our democratic system.

To realise equality of participation, according to Fraser there is a need

- for more **redistribution** (redistribution of material aids)
- for more **recognition** (recognition that people are equal and deserve the same respect)
- for more **representation** (that people know they are represented in our democracy and that their voice is listened to).

These three domains often influence each other. Someone with less money is not infrequently considered as inferior, is less present in the political decision-making and has less influence. People who receive less respect within the existing norms of our society have less chance of having a bearing on the public debate.

In short, various forms of injustice are often cross-linked and connected to each other.

The insights of Fraser fit really well within our story. When young people express their anger about what they find unjust, there is a scream within that for more equality, respect and participation.

POLITICISATION TO CLOSE THE FOREFRONT

Politicisation is therefore more than shouting out anger. Complaints from young people are also always a call, a plea. To everyone, but to the **youth work** and **all who work with young people** in particular. They can ignore or work against those complaints. Or they can recognise the grievances of young people and set to work together with them.

Sometimes, organisations develop actions which are rather aimed at the **individual** who is a victim of injustice. In the fight against racism, for instance, people put the personal identity development of young people with a migration background central. In this way, it becomes an individual, psychological problem instead of a social and structural problem, as we see in the story of the British university.

Sometimes, organisations develop actions which aim at **one aspect**, as a result of which in essence they change little of the mechanism behind injustice. Young people can be allowed their say, but something will only really change when their opinion is also taken seriously. An interpretation of needs in one area does not automatically lead to a more socially just society.

In the spirit of Fraser, it is therefore important not to let go of the **structural questions**. Social justice is only possible if society transforms and all the exclusion mechanisms disappear. This is by

definition an extremely complex assignment. It is discouraging.

But precisely for this reason politicisation is so vital!

Because an important step in the direction of social justice is listening to who experiences social injustice. As a society, we must **listen to people who are rarely listened to**.

There are enough projects within which the participation of people in poverty or young people with a migration background is an agenda item. But all too often that is an obligatory number, a form of fake participation. More Zohra's are needed to shake us awake time and again.

Until we as a society are and remain awake to this.

Time to listen to more stories from and about young people and youth organisations which leap to the forefront.



An important step in the direction of social justice is listening to who experiences social injustice.



3

AT THE FOREFRONT! BUT HOW?

Jeroen Kemel, Babette Träger, Marlies D’heretoge, Emily Mortier, Peter Van Mullem,
Lindsay De Langhe, Kaat De Smet, Oona Platel, Alex Lingier, Mihaïl Soloviov,
Tish Moerman, Bart Van Bouchaute, Reyhan Görgöz en Peter Cristiaensen

We speak of politicisation when an individual or a group encounters and charts injustice. We are already that far. But how do you deal with that now? In what way can they claim change and make a public signal?

In an attempt to clarify this, we distinguish a number of possible strategies in order to politicise.

The first lays the base as it were for the other ones. Because not everyone is immediately included, we speak of an important first step of **awareness**.

From there, ideas can grow **to make a matter visible**.

A step further is **demanding change**.

But you can also approach it differently and think how **you yourself can realise change**.

And all those forms can consist of **offline or online actions**, or a mix of both.

Often one is a step-up to the next and they occur in combination



STRATEGY 1

AWARENESS

When young people address youth workers about injustice that they encounter, there is often the inclination to spring into action immediately. Certainly with regard to experiences which several young people share. But the danger is that a few individuals will lead. That not everyone from the group will be included.

This is why the ‘ambassadors’ in the story of the **British university** decided to first organise a student forum. With the aim of taking the time to involve more students, gather experiences and set to work with them. In this way, the group became stronger and more combative and the belief grew that they could change something. In this way, they could launch their petition with stronger arguments and step to the university board.

The need for **a phase of awareness before taking action** was strongly emphasised by the Bra-

zilian educationalist Paolo Freire. He reached the conclusion that people who are suppressed often accept the mechanisms of their exclusion as ‘something normal’. Furthermore, they also assume that they do not have any real impact on this. In this way, they internalise the social exclusion mechanisms. A process of awareness must break through this internalised fatalism.

We see the importance of a phase of awareness very clearly in an action by KAJ young people regarding **temporary work**.

The danger is that a few individuals will lead. That not everyone from the group will be included.

IS THIS NOW THE MODERN LABOUR MARKET?

The **A** (Arbeid; Labour) in KAJ is a historical reference to Labour young people, but today everyone is welcome in this Flemish movement: young people who work from all study directions and young adults who work, are seeking employment or living in an uncertain work situation. At a congress a number of years ago, a theme arose which spoke of many frustrations of a great deal of members: **temporary work**. KAJ organised a debate about this with people from the government, the union and a labour market specialist. Young people told about their experiences, but came up against a brick wall. “Temporary work ensures a new influx onto the labour market and young people gradually learn the ins and outs of the profession and the correct work attitudes”, was the general opinion. The young people actually got the message: “If temporary work does not work for you, then there is something wrong with your mentality, education or skills.”

This cold shower ensured a tilting moment in the organisation. The abuses in the temporary sector dealing with the public would demand more awareness from all the actors. Also from the youth workers themselves. They also struggled with prejudices about their young people. They too did not always understand the sometimes inadequate behaviour of young people in temporary offices as a form of protest. Against a sector which uses them as a toy. Against a system which they have no control over whatsoever. **Conclusion: the young people had to be listened to at a deeper level.**

In a **first phase**, they talked at the door of temporary offices in various cities to young people about their experiences. During those talks, a great deal emerged.

“ The temporary office called last week about a vacancy in a company, but when I arrived there it turned out not to exist. They just wanted to include me in their file.

I had to report for a job in a factory at 5 am, but when I go there, there were ten people for two jobs. They had just asked more young people to be sure that they could deploy two ‘good ones’ that day.

The action was definitely not plain sailing. Temporary offices called the police because of ‘nuisance’. Or young people got the message that they could forget about a job if they were to talk to the interviewers. Yet the youth workers continued: listening, writing things down and agreeing again to check the witnesses and talk about it. The realisation grew that the practices applied were ‘not normal’. Some young people came to help gather stories.

In a **second phase**, youth workers and young people got all the witnesses together during a training weekend. Together, they analysed facts and consequences: “A permanent contract is promised, but never appears. As a result, the young person did not get a car loan. What does that mean for him?” In this way, categories of

problems emerged. Followed by talks about what young people expect from a job, what working means in life, what dignified working is, etc.

In contrast to what youth workers expected, the young people did not want to take immediate action against temporary offices. They found it more important to steer with their analysis the image of their parents, friends and family about them and to translate their indignation into a rap and a play. Then they wrote a press text and they set up small actions in various cities. Bit by bit, the attention for the problems grew in the regional press, but that did not change much.

This led to a **third, even wider phase**. A small, active group started to collect even more stories and make analyses, to present them during a study day to union members of large companies and employees of temporary offices. The discussion which followed ensured a great deal of awareness. Union members realised all too well that they all too easily accepted a 'substrate' of temporary jobs in their company in order to be able to continue to ensure the majority of the employees such a position.

“ When I was your age, I did the same thing. I was also slouched in my chair, in the evening I spent more time at the pub than at home. But the fact that I could start in a job, under the wings of a few older people, meant that I found my way, in my work and in my life. As a result, I now have my feet firmly on the ground. I realise now: if we do not want to support you now, then many of you will not ever find your way in a decent manner.

As a last step the many facts, analyses and proposals were brought together in a **Black Book Temporary work**, with the title *Is this now the modern labour market?* With this, young activists and youth workers approached policymakers, union officials and managers of temporary offices. A long phase of awareness had laid the basis for actions which disrupted the temporary sector to the core.



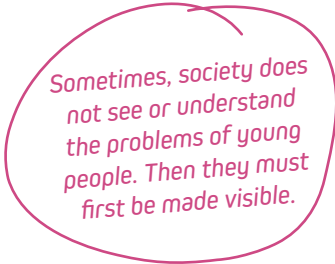
STRATEGY 2

MAKING THE MATTER VISIBLE

Sometimes, young people feel a certain form of injustice deeply, but society does not see or understand their problems. This is why they must first be made visible.

This is possible in many different ways. Often, young people and youth organisations resort to **artistic forms of expression**. There are numerous examples of exhibitions, documentaries, theatre forms, music, poetry, graffiti or slam poetry which try to make these matters visible and audible.

From that great variety of artistic, politicising projects, we bring an example from Amsterdam.



Sometimes, society does not see or understand the problems of young people. Then they must first be made visible.

LOSTWORDS

“Let your voice be heard during Lostwords!”

With this call, the Amsterdam theatre collective LostProject generation Z wants to enter into dialogue about challenges and opportunities that concern young Amsterdam people. Sexuality, social media, rejection, money, gender, Tinder, inequality, crisis and globalisation are examples of themes that were already dealt with. For instance, recently LostWords took place about the grand master plan of the city to do with the liveability of Amsterdam Zuid-Oost.

LostWords are ‘theatrical debates’, a mix of music, dance and spoken word on an abrasive theme. Young actors put to words difficult subjects and hold up a mirror to the young audience. Then the audience is invited to enter into dialogue with actors and (experience) experts.

One of the organisations which asked LostProject to realise a series of LostWords was the Amsterdamse Ouder en Kind Team (OKT; Parent and Child Team). This service from youth aid is active in the area of support with the upbringing. With the project, they wish to facilitate between young people, families and professionals. In the performance ‘Man Down’ it is about the expectations which occur when growing up and becoming a man. As a result of the method, **unusual talks** occur, which have the language, aesthetics and experiences of young people as a starting point.

“On the stage there is a large cage, where eight young people are imprisoned. There, they share love and sorrow and experience conflicting emotions. Sometimes, someone goes and sits on the edges and reflects from this height on the limiting images of ‘being a man’ and on the pressure that these young people in this group experience from all sides. A young person steps out of the cage under loud protest from the others, another person is just thrown out violently. The cage limits, but also offers the protection and security of the togetherness in the group.

ELENA PONZONI AND FEMKE KAULINGREKS,
RESEARCHERS

Man Down is funny, intense and sometimes even violent. The ‘performance’ grew from the own experiences of the young actors. They come from ‘difficult neighbourhoods’, spend a lot of time on the street and are a group where negative imaging makes it difficult to simply ‘meet’ each other. Youth professionals, police or the municipality approach them more often as potential perpetrator or victim than as an equal fellow human being. Sometimes, they feel looked upon as a **‘strange animal species’**, because public service



providers only zoom in on problematic aspects of their lives, while other parts of their world of experience remain underexposed.

Such processes of **us versus them** ('othering') lead to a large distance between young people and professionals. The performance makes this distance clear, but also indicates a different meaning. Participants realise better that that distance is hidden in structures, images and performances of similarity and difference, which we create and maintain together. From youth researcher to policymaker, from Parent and Child Advisor to 'young person from the street'. A second step is required: when we want to approach another person, we must be prepared to reflect on our own position in these structures and to put our own opinion temporarily between brackets.

The performance makes experiences and perspectives which are less visible or audible more visible. As a result, a space occurs in which it becomes possible to research the own position and blind spots with the aid of the story of the other person. In this way, young people could for instance ex-

plain to professionals how they look at professional help and how they experience it when their parents are involved in a support project. Or groups of boys and girls could listen for the first time to each others' feelings and experiences to do with sexting and shaming. Young people explained how they experience social pressure to participate in this. However, also that they receive very little support from adults, while girls are indeed offered awareness programmes and discussion groups.

“ The opening of a risky space in which people question each other both from a personal and professional interest could be the beginning of building up more trust with each other in the neighbourhood. The power of these risky spaces ultimately lies in particular in the disruption of the normal state of affairs.

ELENA PONZONI AND FEMKE KAULINGFREKS,
RESEARCHERS

www.LOSTPROJECT.NL

Sometimes, the emphasis lies on challenging a particular situation, sometimes on concrete demands which offer these solutions.

STRATEGY 3

DEMANDING CHANGE

For many young people and their supervisors, it is not enough to make the problems visible. They want to sound the alarm. Lay proposals on the table. Demand change. The British students did not demand more or less than zero tolerance for racism and discrimination at their university campus. And the young people from the KAJ presented a lively Black book about abuses in the temporary sector to trade unions and temporary companies.

There were previous cautious and polite forms: a petition, an open letter, a debate, etc. But it can also be tougher. Boycotts, demonstrations or occupations do not always remain civilised, but consciously seek confrontation.

Sometimes, the emphasis lies on **challenging** a particular situation, sometimes on **concrete demands** which offer these solutions. In that latter case, the chosen form of action is generally a lever to bring about a dialogue.

We pick two examples to examine more closely:

- In autumn 2019, all the media was suddenly standing on its head: thousands of **young people playing truant** went to Brussels on a school day to demand a different climate policy.
- You already saw them on the cover of this book: the Dream hut where young people from Antwerp elaborate the **J100** proposals to present to policymakers.

CLIMATE TRUANTING



© Léna Chaber

The most well-known example of recent years is undoubtedly the young people playing truant for the climate. Suddenly, a great deal of young people followed in the footsteps of Greta Thunberg by swapping the school benches for the street once a week. As well as the number of participants, the form of action in particular – ‘**truancy**’ – caused much commotion. The existing order was thoroughly disrupted. “Is that allowed and is it possible, young people who raise their voice by skipping school?” There were animated debates in society about that. That it was about

their own future unfortunately often disappeared into the background.

Anyone who looks at the policy of the Flemish and Belgian government or the results of the latest climate tops, will be quite depressed. Even after so much youthful protest, the results are low. On the other hand, the statements of European top politicians that pushing through the European Green Deal – the first, real step to thorough climate policy – would have been **impossible** without the worldwide youth marches.

DEMONSTRATING, DOES THAT RESULT IN ANYTHING?

In the youth podcast ‘Do you understand me now’ of the Flemish public broadcaster VRT, young people in their twenties were presented with a series of questions about the point or not of demonstrating. The answers went in all directions:

Misja (21) from Ghent is a fervent demonstrator. Taking to the street with friends creates a feeling of togetherness, and it plants the seed in the heads of the people at home. According to Misja, demonstrating is the only thing you can do as an ‘ordinary’ person to put rulers under pressure. And if you are not heard, then you have to shout louder.

Irman (21) from Antwerp thinks that demonstrating no longer achieves anything. She took part herself in a few demonstrations and has noticed that they are not listened to. She also thinks it is a

shame that media always focus on the riots and the bad ending of demonstrations. As a result, the message is completely lost. According to her, there are other ways of making your voice heard, such as petitions, boycotts or actions on social media.

Simon (27) from Leuven is a journalist for VRT and is convinced that demonstrating is more relevant than ever. Especially in combination with social media, you can make a real impact. “With a good sign you can go round the world”, he says. But according to Simon, demonstrating has become ‘the new Sunday hobby’ these days. “Today we demonstrate for the Afghans, tomorrow for the olive trees in Greece and then for the pets in America.” As a result, it is impossible to give media attention to all demonstrations.



J100-MEETINGS

In 2015, youth workers in Antwerp neighbourhoods picked up signals about negative imaging by policymakers and more specifically about ‘ethnic profiling’ by the police. In response, a number of organisations with young people in socially vulnerable situations chose to take a collective position. They got together with a few large youth organisations and set up a route with the starting point: “How do we as young people look at our city and how do we see this in the future?”

Under the name J100, eleven youth organisations brought together **a hundred young people with various backgrounds**. Everyone took part on the basis of their own perspective and background. The meetings had the theme of meeting, intrinsic deepening, formulating solutions and working on action together. Youth workers facilitated the process, but the participating young people were allowed to determine the direction themselves.

During the first **J100 top** in November 2016, young people were given the chance to enter into dialogue with experts. Four themes were split up: media, police, work and discrimination. During the meeting, the alderman for Youthwork let her voice be heard. The Antwerp police also took part in the consultation sessions. It was not an easy

talk, but the J100 found it very important to allow police and young people to enter into a dialogue in a peaceful way. In the street that goes wrong all too often.

During the talks, the concern arose that words, ideas and dreams easily disappear again. A number of young people proposed building a tree hut, a **‘Dream hut’** where there is literally a place for dialogue and meeting. A place which is a symbol for the ideas of young people.

In the autumn of 2020, this Dream hut was also effectively realised. Although many politicians were present at the opening, a few young people cut through the ribbon themselves. On the outside, the construction looks like a water tower, spherical at the top. Inside, there are circular benches, ideal for dream sessions and debates.

Covid interrupted the rhythm, but in principle there are approximately monthly **J100 meetings** with 50 to 150 young people and there is an annual **J100 top** with even more participants.

“As youth workers, we try to pick up signals from young people constantly. We lay these on the table in small groups.”



The **meetings** are the moment to bring opinions together. Young people notice from each other that they walk round with the same worries and search for answers and concrete proposals. In the run-up to a **top**, we prepare workshops and group activities with them.

Together we search for the correct form, but they determine the content and choose who will speak. During a top like this, there are dialogue moments with policymakers. And afterwards too, we evaluate together. Were people listening? Can we do something extra? Should we adapt our strategy? Invite someone else?

One of the talks was with our mayor, but that was not a success. Young people felt stigmatised. But there have certainly been

policymakers who gave the young people the feeling that they were indeed being listened to. Even the minister of Youth has already paid a visit.

ILIAS, MOURAD AND SAMIR,
J100 SUPERVISORS

“ Our main concern was that policymakers would knock on our door with problems or riots. As a result, we would keep on being forced into reactions. While we want to be just ahead of policymakers and want to be proactively involved. The young people of the J100 as a structural discussion partner, that is the aim.

FILIP,
J100 COORDINATOR


STRATEGY 4

REALISING CHANGE OURSELVES

Often politicisation is narrowed to a process whereby people 'demand change'. But there is another track: taking matters into their own hands and 'making change'. In other words: getting started themselves and starting something new, often on a small scale. By not waiting for governments or other bodies and realising a 'trial project' themselves, people wish to show society that it can be done differently. A fancy word for this practice is 'prefiguration'.

Two recent examples:

- Because the city council of Menen is not present, a few young people take matters into their own hands to install a number of **fitness machines** in a park.
- Since the Ghent city council wants to sell a historic building with social housing, young people take over the building themselves.



By not waiting for governments and realising a 'trial project' themselves, people wish to show society that it can be done differently.

A FITNESS MACHINE IN THE OWN NEIGHBOURHOOD



“By taking off to various neighbourhoods and on squares, I got to know a great deal of young people full of enthusiasm to make Menen not the Most marginal but the Coolest city in Flanders. In the summer of 2018, one of them visited me with a few friends with plans to build a construction in their neighbourhood, so they would be able to exercise in their neighbourhood. To this day, 3 years later, you can spot them in the park, with a workshop for a group of young guests who have the same enthusiasm as they themselves 3 years ago.

FACEBOOK POST BY JONATHAN,
YOUTH CONSTRUCTION WORKER IN MENEN

There were fitness machines in Menen, but none at all on the other side of the city. The idea of **building a construction themselves** was put on the table immediately by the young people themselves during the first meeting. For this purpose, they worked out how they could elaborate this practically and what the cost price would be for the materials. The group submitted a request for financial support to the city council, but there was no reply.

Finally, in the summer of 2018 the young people just got started. The reactions in the neighbourhood were positive. Young children came to look out of curiosity, older youths rolled up their sleeves and the neighbourhood also offered help: “Just use my jigsaw, that will work better.” It did not take long before a newspaper article appeared, to which the city did indeed react. They thought it was a pity that they had to find out about this via the media (even though a request had been made). It seemed as if the council found it a pity especially that they were not a part of it, because the general reactions – also on social media – were positive.

After the finish of the construction, the city itself went into action. They granted a permit and made sure there was a good foundation. Moreover, in 2020 they took the initiative themselves to place fitness machines in the central part of the city. Since 2021, the fitness lessons continue there, supervised by a young person from the original founding group.

The small experiment led to a large breakthrough.



EN 'T PAND?
HET SPANDE
VOORT...

MI
CASA
SU
KASSA

THE CITY IS FOR EVERYONE

A number of young activists who were part of various Ghent collectives, combine efforts in spring 2021 to occupy Het Pand building in Ghent. The building, part of the historic Carmelite monastery currently offers space for 32 social houses. They would have to leave Het Pand because the owner, social housing company WoninGent, finds renovation too expensive and wants to sell the building. The squatters, who call themselves 'Pandemisten' oppose such a sale to the private market. They think that the residents and the people of Ghent should have a say in the plans. With a pamphlet, they invite residents and people from the neighbourhood to talk about the future of the building:

“ We have occupied Het Pand because we are against the sale of this beautiful common public asset. The sale is kept under the radar by the city and we consider that a bad sign. People will be put

out of their homes for a project which only a few high officials benefit from. We are against privatisation and the money hunt of the current policy, a city is for everyone.

THE PANDEMISTEN SQUATTERS

The owner asks the occupiers to leave the monastery, which is later confirmed by a justice of the peace. But the activists do not intend to leave. With a procession of sympathisers and with banners and slogans, they march through the city centre. They collect more than **1,500 signatures** to be able to explain their proposal at the city council. Since the item is not put on the agenda, a number of activists ask in silence to be able to speak by putting up their hands. But they are not to speak. After half an hour, the chair of the city council puts them out of the room.

Jammere (RECHT)ZAAK



SPAN-
MEND!

On 6 December, a new protest follows against the eviction in the company of 'Sinterkraak' (Santa squatter). The occupation of Het Pand becomes more and more a symbolic case for the acute housing problem. A few days later, they leave the building peacefully, to squat in it again a few weeks later. The Pandemisten squatters invite everyone who feels connected to their fight to come and lend a helping hand: "Until the city provides a plan for social temporary occupancy with a housing possibility, we will do our utmost to form that temporary occupancy ourselves."

There is much brainstorming about that occupancy. Opening Het Pand for the public and allowing the people of Ghent to also decide are important starting points. The idea of a 'Free City', the only place in the centre where people can come without having to consume, is concretised in small-scale initiatives such as a **people's kitchen** and a **give-away shop**. People's councils, jam sessions

and performances take place. Everyone can enjoy the peace of the courtyard.

Finally, the Pandemisten squatters hand over the keys symbolically to two non-profit organisations which, with approval from the city, will start up in Het Pand a walk-in centre for young people in precarious living situations. "This coincides nicely with our objectives", the activists decide, "but if it turns out that the temporary occupants will ever have to make way for a sale, and so Het Pand no longer remains public, we will be ready again to defend it."

The story of the Pandemisten squatters shows how **an occupancy of a temporary nature** ('make change') is linked to **broader actions** ('demand change').

www FACEBOOK.COM/PANDEMISTEN

Offline and online initiatives can enhance each other, if the right mix is found.

OPTIONS: OFFLINE OR ONLINE

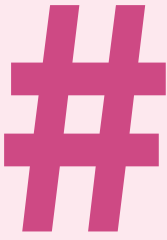
Without an Instagram post, **Zohra's** story would never have been picked up. Nowadays, almost every youth organisation, from **LostProject** to the **J100**, has its own website and its own social medial channels. If you want to know how the **Pandemisten** squatters are getting on, you just have to look on Facebook. More and more often, classical offline means of action are applied faster and more efficiently in online form, just think of petitions. Mobilising people with posters and flyers rarely happens.

Social media or other digital tools can work as an enormous **megaphone** to make more people aware, to make problems visible or to demand changes. Nowadays, everyone can put messages online and mobilise other people. Young people too. Very different than in the past, when an opinion piece in a newspaper was only reserved for familiar adults. Furthermore, the use of social media is low-threshold and cheap.

However, digitalisation also brings **challenges**. Social media are a place where the competition for two seconds' attention is fierce. Breaking out of your filter bubble is not as easy as it seems. Furthermore, social media can also be a **ruthless place** where unnuanced or personal counter-reactions can hit young people hard.

Has digitalisation facilitated the setting-up of politicising actions? The answer is **double-edged**. Digital possibilities have indeed lowered the threshold for making a matter visible or demanding something. According to a research group at Ghent University, signing an online petition is the most popular form of action nowadays. More than 80% of the respondents indicated that they had already done this. But at the same time many people doubt its impact. The world will not change immediately with a click or a like.

What is however clear is: offline and online initiatives can **enhance each other**, if the right mix is found.



HASHTAGTIVISM

An often used way of spreading a message digitally is the use of a hashtag. The most well-known examples are undoubtedly **#BlackLivesMatter** and **#MeToo**. Hashtags help bring people into contact with each other over the whole world who are alarmed by the same issue. In this way, they can coordinate actions in order to have a greater impact. The speed with which the protest around Black Lives Matter also spread in the offline world and the traditional media proves this.

#Trotsop075 (Proudof075) was set up by young residents of the neighbourhood Polenburg in Zaanstad in the Netherlands. A number of years ago, the neighbourhood was portrayed negatively in the news by vlogs from Ismail, a young boy who recorded life on the street. His vlogs were well viewed and soon many young people came to hang out near the supermarket where Ismail could always be found. However, disturbances with the police followed and the whole of the Netherlands reacted outraged. Since then, Poelenburg has been in the news more often as a **'problem neighbourhood'**, where the mainly Turkish-Dutch residents are reported to be insufficiently integrated.

style of 'Humans of New York', every week they post a portrait of a resident who tells his/her story. Young influencers make Insta-Stories about their lives under the same hashtag.

In short, by deploying digital tools they draw the imaging about their neighbourhood to themselves and they try to make their own narrative public.

#BalanceTonBar is another example whereby in late 2021 a hashtag got a great deal moving. Everything started in the Brussels sub-municipality Elsene. Several young women reported that during a night out they were drugged and then harassed or raped. Suspect number 1 appeared to be a barman who worked in two different bars.

However, with the launching of the hashtag, many more witnesses came forward. Barmen do not appear to be the only problem, often it are other customers who apply the same practice. Many young women recognised themselves in these stories, which lead to a number of spontaneous demonstrations, some with more than 1000 participants.

A number of young people therefore started **#Trotsop075** on Instagram. They wanted to draw the reporting about their neighbourhood to themselves and to show the outside world how proud they are of their neighbourhood. In the

A call to boycott a number of bars followed and the action moved to Luik, Ghent, and France and Spain in particular. The hashtag even circulated in Brazil and Canada. Numerous French cities got their own Instagram page.





4

DIY KIT FOR POLITICISING ACTIONS

Marte Ingels, Shinya Xuan, Tina De Gendt, Bart
Van Bouchaute, Reyhan Görgöz en Peter Cristiaensen



NO CHILD ON THE STREET

That a **housing crisis** has reigned in Flanders for many years is stating the obvious. Since there is too little social housing (and so far too long waiting lists), people with a low income are assigned to the lowest segment of the private rental market. There the competition is tremendous, the rent prices are high and the quality of living low. Homelessness is a sad consequence of this social problem for a number of families.

This was already the case in 2017 in Ghent too. At one point, a number of families lost their home. Out of necessity, they slept at night in the city park, to then no longer get out of the vicious circle of homelessness, couch surfing, temporary accommodation, night shelters and homelessness again. In mid-August 2017, a number of youth workers raised the alarm. There, round the table with a number of other organisations and with city services such as the Youth service, they soon reached the conclusion that something needed to be done.

One of the organisations involved was **Jong Gent in Actie (JGIA; Young Ghent in Action)**, an organisation for 14 to 26 year olds which forms part of the *Beweging van Mensen met Laag Inkomen en Kinderen* (Movement of People with a Low Income and Children). They offer young people a place where fun activities are held, but where youth workers also offer a listening ear. In turn, young people engage in sharing experiences of poverty and exclusion and doing something about it together.

“Housing was already our central theme for a few years. So we had already built up some insight into the problems. However, if you then do an activity together and you hear young people say that the previous night they had to search again for a place to sleep and that it ended up being a bench in the park, then you know enough. We had to make this known. Fortunately, in our consul-

tation there were a number of people who were familiar with taking action. In this way, everything soon grew quite quickly from the bottom up. Our young people were immediately keen to jump on this bandwagon. Some even went to consultation meetings on a regular basis and then gave feedback to our group.

THISKA, JGIA PROJECT SUPERVISOR

Dynamics arose and other partners joined, such as the Tenants Union, poverty organisations, social-artistic work, a trade union and a large welfare organisation. In less than two months' time, it went from an internal discussion to a **public action** with a great deal of **media attention**. In concrete terms, the action consisted of a protest march with a finale under the city hall in Ghent. The activists entered into discussion with passers-by, as well as policymakers. "We see this as a wake-up call", replied the Ghent alderman for Housing, who gave a brief speech. "Thanks for holding up this mirror to us", said the OCMW (Public Centre for Social Welfare) chair.

Jong Gent in Actie received a central role in this process, in every phase of the process. By meeting and brainstorming and by showing their creativity, the young people were **co-owners** of the action. Their housing experiences were processed in the press release. Children walked in front, with the same painted slogans and banners. Young people built a 'favela' under the city hall and played music. From this, a samba band emerged which has since provided the atmosphere for a great deal of actions.

Ultimately, all of this led to a greater involvement of large welfare organisations and to the founding of a Housing Taskforce at Ghent level. In addition, the housing crisis grew to the dominant **campaign theme during the local elections** of

2018. In the new Ghent council agreement, ninety million euro was set aside for a better approach.

“ In hindsight, we still had the feeling that we meant something. That Housing Taskforce came out of it, still something. After the elections, there were budgets for the new alderman for Housing. Today or tomorrow, I will write a letter to her to see that she definitely includes our target group in this. Because as project supervisor, I see so many things and that frustrates me. How our young people have to live, how is that possible?

THISKA, JGIA PROJECT SUPERVISOR

March 2021. Reason for a new action is the first, scientifically conducted **'homeless count'** in Belgium. Coordinated by the King Baudouin Foundation, researchers from the universities of Leuven and Liège collected homeless figures in the cities of Liège, Aarlen, Ghent and the province of Limburg. The most remarkable results: 1) the figures are higher than expected (in Ghent 37 social organisations counted 1873 homeless) and 2) this includes many children and young people (in Ghent as many as 404).

“ After the announcement of these figures, the outrage was great and the Ghent network set to work again. With the result an action under the city hall, whereby we depicted the housing problem once more using scale models. We took part as Jong Gent in Actie, but were far less active than during previous actions. We feel that our young people are fed up with the theme. They have worked really hard for that for years and have now had enough.

ANDREAS, JGIA GROUP WORKER

FIVE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS (AND A IMPETUS TO ANSWER)

The example of **JGIA** is a good step-up to talk about the way in which you approach a politicising process. You will not find tutorials about that on YouTube, so we will list a number of important steps, linked to a series of questions. With in advance this disclaimer anyway: in reality, politicising work rarely takes place in planned steps. It will therefore be a DIY anyway, with a great deal of action and reaction, improvising and dealing with setbacks.

QUESTION IN ADVANCE IS THERE A CONFIDENTIAL RELATION?

For setting up a politicising action together with young people – and for simply politicising work – there is one condition. Not a pre-condition but a basic condition. Without that no politicising work. Here it is: there must be a confidential relation between young people and their professional supervisors. **A safe climate.** Without trust, youth workers will receive few signals, without trust it is difficult to set up public actions together with young people.

Since this is so important, we are dedicating a separate chapter to this (From safe to brave).

QUESTION 1 IS THERE AN ISSUE? IS THERE A QUESTION OF COLLECTIVE INJUSTICE?

As a youth worker, you will undoubtedly already have been confronted with young people who come to you with their worries. Often personal incidents, but sometimes there are also true stories of deprivation, misunderstanding or discrimination behind them. Economic, cultural or political injustices, to use the terminology of Fraser for the last time. What do you do with that, as a youth worker?

There are various options. You can let the issue lie, or you can search for individual solutions for the complaints. But you can also do the same as the **JGIA** youth workers. Or the same as the **students** at the British university did about discrimination or the **KAJ young people** about temporary work: connect the stories and together search for what can be done with them.

The choice which you make as a youth worker will undoubtedly be influenced by a number of factors:

- How do you see your own role as a youth worker? Rather as an individual healthcare professional or priority group worker?
- What space do you have? How do your colleagues and your organisation look at this? Are you encouraged in this or rather restrained?
- What thoughts and feelings have the upper hand? A certain fatalism because the problems have been detected all too often? Or the outrage that something must really be done with those stories?

Not everyone feels strong enough to take the adventurous and bumpy road of politicisation. Not everyone feels supported, trained or experienced enough. Politicising requires guts. And yes, it is up to youth workers to create space for politicising work. However, the responsibility does not lie exclusively with them. Working in a politicising way also requires space

- **from the colleagues**

The support of the youth worker starts with the colleagues. They can offer intrinsic knowledge, methodical skills and emotional support.

- **in the organisation**

Interesting question: is working in a politicising way registered in the mission of the organisation? And if so, is this also supported by people and means? But then too, support is not always assured. Sometimes, that space remains limited due to the cautiousness of the organisation not to lose subsidies. Or not to put at risk the good collaboration with certain bodies. Or not to lose the sympathy in public opinion.

- **with partners**

Broader networks can contribute intrinsic or methodical expertise and thus enhance politicising work. The support in society and from the government is getting broader. However, networks can also have a delaying or even paralysing effect if there are intrinsic or strategic differences at play.

- **in society**

For a great deal of groups in society it is not evident to reveal opinions. They are already fighting against prejudices or discrimination. The risk exists that you enhance prejudices when you speak out in public. Or that by taking a stance, young people will be even more stigmatised and lose opportunities. Then you must of course consider whether it is worth it.

- **with policymakers**

Politicising often means questioning the existing order. Some policymakers have difficulty with this. Then you can get a right earful and end up in a power struggle. In that case, it can sometimes be a strategic choice to not or no longer 'go public', but to lobby 'behind the scenes'. Or to just 'go public' (again) if you come up against a brick wall while lobbying.

Are you, both young people and youth workers, ready to set up a politicising action, well aware that action usually brings about reaction?

QUESTION 2

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO WITH THIS ISSUE? WHAT EXACTLY IS THE PROBLEM?

If the answer to the previous step is a 'go', it is important to reach a **correct formulation** of the problem. What exactly is it about? What is the extent of the problem? What are the causes and what are the consequences? What solutions have other people already suggested and/or tried out? And of course: what is the importance of this issue for us and how far can our involvement go?

With this analysis you will fall back on numerous resources. You can look up background articles or TV programmes and discuss them with the young people. Or you can invite experts.

In addition, it is certainly interesting to look for experiences of other organisations from the wide social work. Just because they are close to the living environment of the people with whom they work, they have a privileged position for determining and naming problems, and making them visible.

An interesting thinking exercise to estimate the consideration about involvement are the **'zones of influence'**.

- What is our 'direct sphere of influence'? What can we change ourselves, on the basis of our own organisation and actions?
- What is our 'indirect sphere of influence'? Where can we exercise influence by applying pressure?
- What falls 'outside of our sphere of influence'? What issue can we make visible, but without us having any idea whether our contribution can lead to concrete change?

QUESTION 3

CAN WE GO PUBLIC WITH THIS ISSUE? DO WE CHOOSE FOR POLITICISATION OR FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH?

As we already wrote before, there are different valuable ways, as a youth worker or as a youth work organisation, to chart a theme. You can take on board the defence of your young people and go to the services yourself to get something done. Or you can 'lobby' behind the scenes and go directly to policy-makers. In order to detect matters, to provide them with information or to whisper suggestions to them.

But we do not call this politicising. Because the public forum is not visited.

Note, it can be very useful at certain times not to politicise.

- When it is not the choice of the young people themselves.
- Because you already need all your energy for individual needs within your group for instance.
- Or because you need more time to reinforce your story. In this way, for a long period young people from the KAJ have collected witnesses before revealing their collective demands.
- Or because you want to avoid coming up against a brick wall, when you discover with the last question that barely anything lies within your sphere of influence.

Ultimately, you must of course **cut the knot**. Are you, both young people and youth workers, ready to step 'outside' with the complaints? In order to set up a politicising action, well aware that action usually brings about reaction? More about these possible reactions in the chapter about power and counter-power.

Spontaneously, we think of concrete changes in the policy. However, objectives can also be aimed at the public opinion. Or at rules and structures. Or at imaging.

QUESTION 4

HOW DO WE POLITICISE THIS ISSUE? WHAT? WHO? WHERE TO? HOW?

WHAT?

Do you make a particular injustice visible in the first place? Or do you also make suggestions for helping to solve the problems? Or do you begin yourself with a small-scale, alternative solution?

WHO?

As a group or organisation, do you set to work alone? Or do you search for supporters?

Undoubtedly, there are also other organisations occupied with the same theme. Alliances can therefore be very useful. Without the wide network of Ghent social organisations, Jong Gent in Actie would never have been able to realise the demonstration **No child on the street**. Without a coalition between eleven Antwerp youth organisations no **J100**. "As a collective, we have more weight on the policy of the city than as an individual organisation. We run less risk to be played against each other and are better protected against difficult 'divide and rule' strategies", according to Filip from the J100.

Although alliances also always lead to questions. Even if you share the same viewpoint, not everyone is intrinsically and/or strategically on the same wavelength. Agreements are required about the way in which decisions are made, about division of tasks, etc. However, a wider platform of course gives more strength, certainly if you expect resistance as soon as you go public.

WHERE TO?

What goal do you hope to achieve?

- What achievable goal do you wish to aim for in the **short term**?
- Are there **long-term goals** which you know will not be achieved immediately, but which you however keep in mind?
- You can also dwell on what you want to achieve as a **minimum** in order to speak of a successful action.
- Or with what 'in an ideal world' the **maximum** result could be.

The Housing Taskforce was a minimum short-term objective which the activists of **No child on the street** saw the importance of. However, the homeless count of 2021 and the 404 Ghent children on the street prove that most long-term objectives have not nearly been reached, on the contrary.

Spontaneously, we think when formulating objectives we think of **concrete changes** in the policy, whether it concerns a government or institution, local or national. However, objectives can also be aimed at fellow citizens and the public opinion. Or at rules and structures. Or at imaging. They can be very local, or very global, as with the climate crisis.

The Black book to do with **temporary work** with which the KAJ young people approached poli-

cymakers and the media is a good example. The process began with numerous individual talks between youth workers and temporary employed young people in which the obviousness of what had happened to them and the self-blame was broken through. When they thought to whom they wanted to tell their story in the first instance, they chose – a bit surprising for youth workers – their parents and friends.

Politicising processes are often more layered than ‘demanding changes of the policy’. So objectives too.

HOW?

You already read in the chapter ‘At the forefront! But how?’ that many options lie open here.

- Do you choose a long approach to **awareness**, like the **KAJ young people**?
- Do you wish in particular to **make** the matter **visible**, like the participants of **LostWords**?
- Do you **demand change**, like JGIA did with their action **No child on the street**?
- Or do you also wish to **‘make change’**, like the young people in Menen who built **fitness machines** themselves?

Demanding change can also be done in a great many ways: you can search for the **dialogue** in particular, or you can – carefully or resolutely – enter into the **confrontation**. Professionals and organisations often have the inclination to first see whether dialogue can result in something, while young people will perhaps rather choose the second option out of impatience. But then too, there are still large differences: a ‘good’ petition or a ‘naughtier’ demonstration? An open letter in the local media or a sit-in in front of the city hall? Or a hashtag on social media?

Often dialogue and confrontation alternate. With their street action and all the media attention, the activists of No child on the street immediately give the conflict a sharper edge. In this way, the housing problems became a central theme for the city council elections. However, that phase was followed by consultation with the city and a phase of dialogue in the Housing Taskforce. This example shows how building up power usually does not happen at one moment as a result of one activity, but is often the result of a long process in which politicising actions alternate with steps under the radar.

A question that invariably also comes up here is the following: what with **media**?

Undoubtedly, you have to enhance your **own (social) media** yourself. A website, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc. In addition, you can address external media. In the past, this concerned newspapers, radio and television, which received a press release in the hope that they would give the action some attention. Nowadays, the options here are also of course much broader. Once you manage to go viral, you will have taken off. In the chapter about online activism, we saw good examples of the power of a hashtag.

QUESTION 5

WHEN IS A POLITICISING PROJECT SUCCESSFUL?

Politicising is not a path you do down with the certainty of reaching the final goal hoped for. Now and again, it will perhaps seem rather like a path with no end. Consequently, a very useful question is: “What is ‘success’ in working in a politicising way?”

Is working in a politicising way only successful when a structural change has been reached? When you have realised short-term goals? Or when your long-term goals have been reached?

Or can results also lie elsewhere? Has the group become closer? Has your organisation become stronger? Do the young people have more self-confidence to stand up for their opinion? Are they proud of what they have done?

We encounter here the classic tension between process and result.

- A successful process is a process in which young people feel heard and seen. A process from which they gain recognition and pride.
- A successful result is another matter. This depends to an important extent on external factors. Young people and youth workers sometimes carry out the labours of Sisyphus with their politicising work, again and again making the problems of their target group visible. However, that does not mean that they are in control and can achieve results just like that.

Young people and certainly young people in a vulnerable position grow up in a society where they often stand in the wings. Fatalism then quickly steals around the corner. With young people, but also with youth workers.

BUT HOW DO YOU BREAK THROUGH FATALISM?

That is never easy, but politicising is often an attempt to indeed do this. Being enthusiastic about something, and at the same time realistic.

With the action **No child on the street** the expectations were consciously not set too high by the supervisors. After all, the housing crisis will not be resolved quickly. Being heard and getting recognition would already be a success. However, to keep the dynamics in the group, it was important to cherish and to celebrate small interim steps as ‘small successes’. That more and more organisations joined the action and contributed their expertise for example. One intrinsically, the other organisationally. Or that concrete plans to go out on the street soon came about.

For a moment, there was **a serious setback**: a sleep-in was not allowed. However, the dynamics remained intact and a switch was quickly made to a new plan: a demonstration through the city. Finally, with the Housing Taskforce something came out of it which they could be very proud of. A short-term goal was realised. Although everyone realised that the long-term goal – no more children who have to sleep on the street and a solution to the housing crisis – were still just as far away. What the homeless count a few years later confirmed ...

Social Work students who researched this action within the framework of their bachelor project, wrote the following about it: “The young people themselves probably do not see this that strongly,

but we noticed how proudly they told their story. They received recognition in their humanity and were listened to.”

WHEN IS A POLITICISING PROJECT COMPLETED?

Often there is **no well-defined end**. It is important to complete a strong phase of politicisation, a strong action or activity and to draw up the balance along with young people. Politicisation is not something which you always maintain in an intensive way as a youth work organisation. It is normal that it comes ‘with moments’ and in phases of more or less intensity.

IMPORTANT ADDITIONAL QUESTION HOW DO WE KEEP YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE HELM?

It is often a delicate balancing exercise to involve young people in every phase of the politicising process and at the same time not lose sight of the goal.

So **an extra question** belongs with each of the previous questions:

- The impetus and the feeling of injustice perhaps did indeed come from the young people (step 1),
- but is it possible to formulate the problems not ‘for’ them, but ‘together with’ them (question 2)? Are they intrinsically involved in the analysis of the problem?
- Are they completely in favour of going public, well aware that action can possibly also lead to negative reactions (question 3)? What is feasible and safe for them?
- What role do they play in the concrete execution (question 4)?

Certainly if you work with a broad coalition, it is not evident to give young people a central posi-

Is working in a politicising way only successful when a structural change has been reached? Or can results also lie elsewhere?

tion. **No child on the street** became an action supported by a great deal of social organisations. Although this meant that there had to be many meetings, Jong Gent in Actie tried to involve its young people as much as possible. If it was possible by taking along someone from the group to the meeting, if it was not possible giving detailed feedback afterwards.

During a **J100** top, it were the young people themselves who spoke out. As soon as the choice is made who will speak, a preparation route of 3 or 4 moments is set up. Everything is gone through: what they want to know, what questions they want to ask, etc.

Additional point of attention: how do you make sure that young people and children remain in the foreground explicitly themselves, even if during a public action there will possibly be cameras? Can one of them speak out? Talk to the press? How do you prepare them for that? How do you protect them afterwards, for instance on social media?

With the action **No child on the street** the choice was made to let young people and children walk in front during the demonstration, but the JGIA project supervisor was appointed as spokesperson.

IN SEARCH OF MIGRATION HERITAGE

We will add an extra example whereby young people are completely at the helm. Since 2020, Turkish music cassettes from the 1970's and 1980's have been exhibited in a display cabinet in the **Ghent City museum STAM**. They are the very first but also the only items which bear witness to the migration movements which were typical of the city. Nowadays, 4 in 10 Ghent people have a migration background.

"This is not correct", was the reaction of Ercan Cesmeli, founder of the Turkish-Ghent self-led organisation Burgerplicht (Civic duty) during a guided tour. Recognition of migration in heritage is not a matter of compensation, but of democracy. If the STAM wishes to portray itself as a 'breeding ground for democracy' and a forum for discussion about the past, something has to change. If it is the intention to give the collective memory of all Ghent people a place, then stories and objects about migration are also part of this. This is about recognition and representation.

Volunteers of Burgerplicht discussed further, together with employees of the museum. What was immediately noticeable was that a great deal of young people were very motivated to contribute ideas, but at the same time also very much in search of their own migration past. In search of 'Hidden City histories' for another STAM project, migration historian Tina de Gendt had the same experience with young Turkish people.

“ I now want to see the questions answered which I have struggled all my youth with, so that I no longer need to ask my children that. Why was I born here? How did my parents end up here?

YOUNG PERSON WITH A TURKISH BACKGROUND

The noses were pointing in the same direction and the time was ripe for a project with young people. With the final goal – a worthy place for **migration heritage** in a room at the STAM. Museums have numerous 'participative instruments' to collaborate with 'target groups', from toolkits to guest curatorship. However, out of fear of lack of ownership of the young people, the museum employees chose the '**negotiation method**' which historian Tina de Gendt also applied in her project.

“ What is migration heritage? There is no framework and there are barely any experts. It is up to the young people to give meaning to objects. There are discussion moments among young people mutually and with a steering group. Move objects from cabinet 1 (supplied by young people) to cabinet 2 (for discussion) and finally cabinet 3 (to definitely be included). Together, we evaluate and look at whether this whole can tell the bigger picture.

GHEENT HERITAGE UNIT COORDINATOR

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of real recognition in this story. Many young people with a migration background grow up with the feeling of having no control over their future. What place do they have in our society? Youth workers set to work every day with this and other pressing questions about forming an identity. A room with migration heritage may not seem like much, but for thousands of young people who pay an annual school visit here to learn about 'their history', the message is however clear: you are not an anomaly, you are not alone and you

are not the first one. This museum is not just for you, it is also about you and from you.

Meanwhile, the team for the very first project is ready: the ball is now in the court of the young people from Posküder youth centre. As the first people, they will help determine what will become migration heritage. This is symbolically tremendously important. **The project runs with them, and not over them.** Their needs, dreams and visions receive a place.





5

POWER AND COUNTER- POWER

Denoix Kerger, Eri Park, Bart Van Bouchaute,
Reyhan Görgöz en Peter Cristiaensen

Building up counter-power usually takes place during a long process with many different steps.

IN SEARCH OF TILTING MOMENTS

What we may never forget is that politicising is all about power inequality. The issues that young people want to make public are inseparably linked to underlying power relations. Often, it is from a less powerful position that they demand change or develop an alternative. They disrupt the dominant discourse and existing game rules.

When elaborating a strategy and form of action, a new question becomes central: **“How can we tilt those power relations?”**

Between powerful and powerless people, forms of confrontation and resistance are often a pure necessity. Although conflict is often dismissed as ‘destructive’ and critically questioned as non-constructive, conflict can exactly help to build up a better balance. Often, we see that only after a phase of conflict a new compromise can be worked towards which better meets the demands.

Politicisation does not in any case take place in a power-free space.

With the action **No child on the street**, we saw a combination of different strategies. With the demonstration at the city hall, the organisations sought the confrontation. Their aim was to refine the conflict in the long term. Then, a phase of dialogue followed, with the set-up of a Housing Taskforce by the city.

Building up counter-power does not usually take place at one moment with one activity, but during **a long process** with many different steps. Building up power demands a change strategy in which politicising actions and moments are alternated with other forms of political actions, such as lobbying behind the scenes with an alderman or putting it before a Taskforce.

POWER IN MANY FORMS

The story of power is much more subtle than one system that manages everything. Power is a relation between people and groups, whereby one can manage the behaviour of the other one. Power can therefore take many forms.

In our society, certain people and groups have acquired a position of power. We call this **'structural power'**. We usually do not dwell on this, but they achieve their power from their position in our social-economic system. In this way, we see in the story of **No child on the street** how difficult it is for young people with a low income to find accommodation. On the private rental market, the competition is great and they often draw the shortest straw. The social rental market is too small and has to deal with dreadful waiting lists. Landlords benefit from that scarcity and from the inadequate check on discrimination. The power relations have become distorted. Only structural changes on the housing market can put that right again.

Very often, we think of power as a **'repressive power'**. Anyone who is powerful can force other people to do or not do something. Think of punishing teachers, a municipal administrative

sanction fine for young people, arresting protesters or blame for an employee. This power is clear and visible.

However, power can also occur in a different way. In every society, there are things that citizens find 'normal' to do. That happens to be expected. The French philosopher Michel Foucault called that **'normalising power'**. This power is more subtle but very effective. This power does not come from one institute, but is produced everywhere without us consciously realising it: at school, in the family, on TV, etc. Just because the normalising power is not noticeable, it is much stronger. It results in obvious views about poverty, unemployment or what is expected of young people.

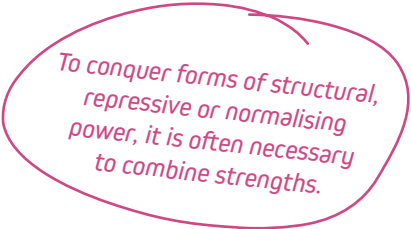
Politicising actions sometimes clash with repressive power, but even more often with normalising power. Young people turn up 'unexpectedly' to demand their place. What society finds normal, they do not find normal.

To conquer forms of structural, repressive or normalising power, it is often necessary to combine strengths. To bring together 'peers'. To build up **'collective counter-power'**.

Why would people be prepared to join forces? Self-interest undoubtedly plays a role, but solidarity is often just as important. 'Us' against 'them'. Although it often requires a great deal of effort to bring all those individuals together, like the example of the **KAJ young people** taught us. In some sectors, employees are strongly organised within unions and they can command good wages and working conditions. However, this is certainly not the case for young temporary workers. Only after a patient build-up of many months, did they manage to bring young people together with their stories. To thus convince temporary offices and policymakers as well as trade unions that temporary work deserves better rules.

In order to build up power, you need so-called '**power sources**'. From where can someone draw power?

- From his/her **position**. Formally (a post or a job) or informally (authority due to experience or power of conviction).
- From his/her **expertise**. Knowledge is power, both intrinsic knowledge and strategic knowledge. However, experience is also a form of knowledge.



To conquer forms of structural, repressive or normalising power, it is often necessary to combine strengths.

- From his/her **organisational or financial power**. Money gives power. However, a strong group of volunteers can also set a great deal in motion.
- From his/her **relations and networks**. Personal connections can open doors.
- From his/her **social support**. Power in numbers. With a lot of supporters, you can achieve more.
- From **media attention**. Anyone who receives demands in the media or can go viral via social media is in a stronger position.

The **J100** does not have a formal position, but many means. They gain their strength – their counter-power – from the network of 11 youth organisations and 100 (or sometimes more) young people. Collectively, they can allow themselves more towards the (subsidising) government than a small organisation. The large group of supporters and the media attention help with this.

Just like you thought along with young people about a strategy, they will think of a counter-strategy.

HEARING THE TRUTH

If, together with young people, you complain about particular forms of injustice, then you sometimes come up against the existing power. For course, it can then start to growl. Convinced of their view of the matter, they do not want change to take place just like. And just as you thought along with the young people about a strategy, they will also think about a counter-strategy. It is important to dwell on this. Because this could be about **subtle forms from headwind to serious forms of aggression**. Or both together.

A few examples of possible reactions:

1 . “IT IS NOT ALL THAT SERIOUS.”

A classic is **minimising** the problem. The signals from the young people are not taken seriously and they are fobbed off – politely or not.

2 . “THE PROBLEM LIES OUTSIDE OF OUR SCOPE.”

A second classic is **passing the buck**. The responsibility does not lie with them, but higher up. Often, this is also partially true. In complex, social situations, there is rarely one single person responsible to be pointed at. Although there are however always power differences present.

Imagine that the fight in the example becomes more severe – for instance, an article appears in the press – then the reaction can also be more focused on the activists themselves. “You are not reasonable, it is not easy for us either.” In this way, we come to the following argument.

3 . “IT IS A VERY COMPLEX MATTER.”

A recognisable strategy is playing with **‘complexi time’**. This can happen in many ways: from bringing hiss into the story to all kinds of delay manoeuvres. People set up a working group and the group will analyse the problem. While according to the activists the analysis was completed long ago. Delaying can be a particularly insidious strategy, certainly for groups who all too often have a rude awakening. After all, delay leads to despondency. To weapon yourself against this, as a group you must have your feet firmly on the ground.

4 . “NOW YOU HAVE TO BE QUIET!”

A stronger counter-strategy is **blocking or securing the debate**. People close the door.

5 . “YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR DAMAGE, YOU WILL HAVE TO BEAR THE CONSEQUENCES.”

In the previous points, it was always about forms of abuse of power which we can call passive-aggressive. They use evaded forms of power projection. However, it can sometimes become **openly aggressive**. Hereby people can aim their grievances at the whole group or at individuals. If you as an activist are dependent on the other party for subsidies, income, work or housing, it may become aggressive manipulation. After all, threats exist in all forms, from blame or cutting subsidies to dismissal or legal steps.

Save your energy for building up your group and your knowledge and strategy.

FIGHTING BACK

A few tips to remain with your feet firmly on the ground with so much headwind:

1 . PREPARE WELL.

Think in advance of what reactions you might get. If you are going to sit round the table, then agree properly what your strategy is, who the spokesperson is, what opposition you can expect and how you wish to respond to this.

2 . DO NOT LET A WEDGE BE DRIVEN.

Ensure a good forum in order to discuss firmly about content and strategy, but close ranks when you enter into dialogue with the opponent.

3 . PREPARE FOR INDIVIDUAL INTIMIDATION.

Do not respond to reactions to individuals, but indicate that you will take this to the whole group.

4 . BROADEN YOUR NETWORK.

Make coalitions with other groups or organisations which work around the same problems and are on the same wavelength. In this way, you create a wider support for the action.

5 . ALWAYS COMMUNICATE CLEARLY.

Make sure that you continue to communicate about the aim of the action, both internally and externally. Clear communication is vital, certainly where it concerns a long build-up of power from the bottom up. Remember that you are not doing a sprint, but running a marathon.

6 . HIGHLIGHT EVERY SMALL VICTORY.

In your communication, it is important to repeat which steps have already been taken and what they have resulted in. Do not let the good feeling of those moments get snowed under. This is important to keep people on board, but also to include new people in the story.

7 . FOCUS ON THE CONTENT.

Often the temptation is great to ‘psychologise’ your opponent. To focus on his/her character or temperament. This makes little sense and detracts from the content. It is even counterproductive because it precisely legitimises the figures in their position of power. Save your energy for building up your group and your knowledge and strategy.

8 . TEMPORISE OR SPEED UP.

Try to get a view of the rhythm of the process. Sometimes it is important to speed up, for instance to be ahead of the opponent and to present an alternative yourself. Sometimes it is important to be aware of pressure applied (“This has to be decided now, that is how it works”). Buying time can be a strategy which serves several objectives. On the one hand, it gives the chance to react collectively and to not allow the group to play against each other. At the same time, it also gives the chance to think about the strategy and thus take a next step more firmly.



6

**FROM SAFE
TO
BRAVE**

Denoix Kerger, Eri Park, Bart Van Bouchaute,
Reyhan Görgöz en Peter Cristiaensen

*With deradicalisation
as a starting point,
we undermine
the foundation of
our work.*

BOYCOTT DERADICALISATION

Politicising with and by young people requires a confidential relation, as we already announced in a previous chapter. But what does that mean, a safe climate? And how do you create such a thing?

Let's start with the opposite. A few years ago, when Europe was confronted with terror attacks by radical Muslims, European governments were full of the concept of 'deradicalisation'. To avoid young people born in Europe from still moving to Syria or committing attacks, preventative action was required. Young people who threatened to radicalise had to be 'deradicalised'. Youth welfare work was approached. Projects which would counteract radicalisation in young people via positive identity development could receive subsidies. Other organisations were asked to show that radicalisation was present in their neighbourhoods and districts.

Uit De Marge non-profit organisation and other Flemish young people organisations refused to enter into this project group. With the following justification:

“ Trust and confidentiality are two of the basic principles on which the youth work relies. Can young people still trust youth work organisations, if they are financed because the government considers the target group as possible radicalising young people? Furthermore, youth workers have a discretion obligation with regard to the children and young people with whom they work, which with this appeal would be as good as violated. To what type of youth work are we incited with this focus? We work with young people on the basis of their strengths and talents. At those moments a trust bond often occurs. That bond allows us to also support young people in other life domains: poverty, school drop-out, young people's unemployment or dealing with superdiversity.

In other words: with deradicalisation as a starting point, we undermine the foundation of our work, a trust relationship, a safe climate. In short, a safe space. A statement from the youth work that could count.

A PLACE TO CHILL AND MUCH MORE

A few years ago, a young girl from Antwerp, Saida, worked in youth welfare. At one point, she gave up her job for a **dream**.

“ I dreamt of a house where young people could come in without any threshold. A house that is open all day. They do not need to have a reason either to come in, just a place to chill... And then it will come, won't it? Because from the moment you come in somewhere and it clicks, then the help request will come.

Together with young people and other youth workers, she organised a three-day brainstorm. The idea of a **multifunctional place** grew from there.

“ A place where we will study. A place where we can withdraw if it is not going well at home. A place where we meet with our friends because it is not possible at home. A place where we can confide in someone if we are having

difficulties. A place where all kinds of activities can find their place and everyone can take the initiative. An accessible house, with professional supervisors and healthcare professionals, present and approachable. A place where you are always listened to without judgement, where there is always hope and a perspective is sought. Based on a very strong foundation: trust and proximity. In short, a place to chill and much more.

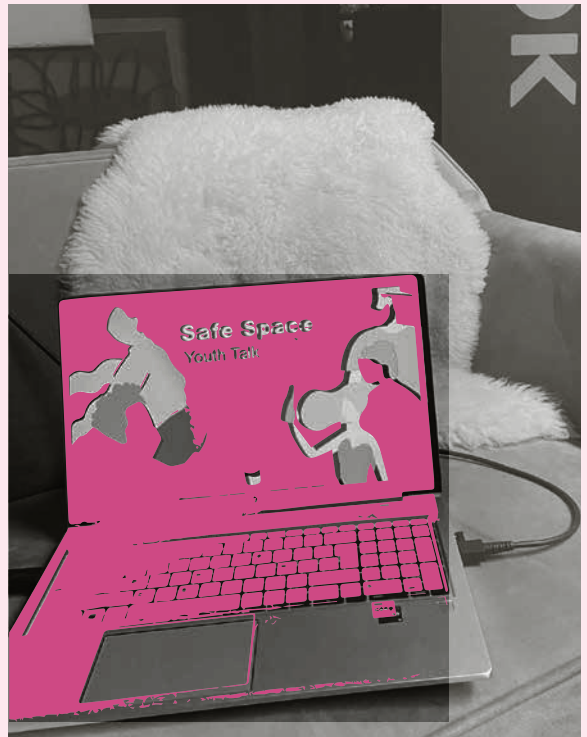
Meanwhile there is a place, in a house in Antwerp. The young people christened this new multifunctional place 'Safe Space non-profit organisation'. Meanwhile, the organisation has volunteers and employees from various backgrounds and specialisms. All of them once entered the house as young people. Everyone also supports the activities: the coordinator, the employees, the young people who help with brainstorming and were at the root of the organisation and the new children and young people who come in.

Young people and children help to puzzle out the planning and contribute new ideas. Employees seek broadening via sport, dance, music, theatre or slam poetry and ensure an offer of skills such as holding interviews, working with cameras, mounting vlogs, etc.

Every Friday there is a **chat cafe**. Employees have difficult themes at the back of their minds, but usually spontaneous chats occur. Themes which come up in the house, such as sexting, shaming or social pressure.

Once a month there is a **Youth Talk** whereby they invite someone.

“ Generally, they are role models who talk about their experiences. About how they developed their strength. This leads to stimulating and pressing questions. In this way, stigmas are broken through and young people are motivated to roll up their sleeves themselves.



FROM SAFE SPACES ...

That the Antwerp young people from the Safe Space non-profit organisation chose this name is no coincidence. The concept came from the United States, where it was originally used in particular among black university students. For them a safe space was a 'safe' place where they could meet together without being confronted with discriminating views.

Meanwhile, the term is also common in Europe, for instance in youth work. There it received the meaning of a space where a particular group can be together without the pressure that they experience elsewhere. It is therefore about people who share features, experiences or grievances and wish to work on them in a safe environment.

In that sense, safe spaces are **nothing new**.



Safe spaces are very important, for very diverse groups, but also raise important questions.

Social work for instance has a long tradition of **women's groups and women's houses**. The same applies to girls' organisations in youth work. There was a need for a place where women and girls could meet in a safe environment and could exchange experiences without interference from men. This 'forbidden access for guys' gave them the feeling that they could speak, think and discuss more freely.

This need still exists today. All too often, people think that gender equality has been completely realised. So that these types of **'separate' girls' organisations** are no longer necessary. The social reality contradicts this. Girls testify nowadays of increasing 'unsafety' in very diverse contexts: in their social life, sport or education. They find that public spaces are often more spaces for boys than for girls.

Conclusion: safe spaces are very important, for very diverse groups: girls, boys, people who share a particular background. They are places where they can be themselves, protected against threats which they experience, such as discrimination, sexism, racism or homophobia. Where they can share experiences, but likewise can enter into hard discussions.

However, in addition, these safe spaces also raise very important questions. Are they at risk of becoming islands of likeminded people? A form of falling back on the own group? From withdrawing from the social debate? Are they not an obstacle then to integration, to participation in society?

... TO BRAVE SPACES

Let's look further into the girls' organisations in youth welfare work. Because in practice they are very diverse nowadays. Often, it is about meeting and having fun. However, just as often it is about becoming more assertive, becoming aware of your own capacities and standing up for yourself. Encouraged by the supervisors, the girls question their position in society and think about what they can do about that. This takes place via training, themed evenings or other activities.

With the result that girls **do dare to enter into conversation** with their parents, teachers or with boys. Or with the alderman for Youthwork for example, about the question why they may follow an animator course wearing a headscarf, but may not supervise playground activity.

In other words: the strength of safe spaces is one important aspect. Doors may sometimes be closed. But not always. They must also swing open. A 'real' safe space is also a springboard where young people build up sufficient self-confidence and draw courage in order to ... take a leap. Then a safe space also becomes a brave space.

And thus we have arrived at politicising. 'Separate' brave spaces too, from their safe space, can draw the courage to make visible shared experiences, for instance of sexism or racism and to challenge structural thresholds of the injustice which they are confronted with.

We saw all of this in many stories. Starting points of the drop-in house **Safe Space** non-profit organisation are safety and a low threshold. However, within that safety the space occurs to fling open the door again. During chat cafes and Youth Talks, to discuss social themes which are the impetus for new initiatives. Also during the **LostWords** of LostProject, it is ultimately about the confrontation of the internal discussions with the outside

A 'real' safe space is also a springboard where young people draw courage in order to ... take a leap.

world. Who bears the responsibility for also realising proposals? What is our responsibility?

The **Dream hut** is an ideal place which is firstly a safe space (J100 meetings), to then become a brave space (J100 top, confrontation with policymakers).

FROM DERADICALISATION TO POLITICISATION

At the beginning of this chapter, we talked about 'deradicalisation' and how young people's organisations refused to apply for subsidies within the framework proposed by the government. Where they are willing to make an effort are brave spaces. Young people must get space precisely to 'find the courage' to set to work on their layered identity. Youth workers must be on their side and give them space to speak out within their safe space, sometimes in a way that is not always possible in the outside world. At the same time, youth workers must also support them and teach them to express their experiences, so that they can participate in society as young citizens.

This is a very different preventative approach. From repressive to positive, educational and politicising.

THE ROLE OF YOUTH WORKERS IN BRAVE SPACES

In order to make a safe space a brave space too where politicising work is possible, there are a number of vital points of attention for youth workers and supervisors of young people.

CHECK 1 IS THERE ENOUGH TRUST? ARE YOU TRUSTWORTHY?

It is important to make agreements about how all the things discussed in the safe space are dealt with. Everyone must be able to say what they think without being attacked for it. There must be this trust between the young people, but also between young people and youth workers.

Very important to this is that the young people experience the youth worker as trustworthy. This is strongly linked to the discretion obligation. No misunderstanding must exist about what young people entrust with every discretion to a trustworthy supervisor. This trust forms the basis of the educational relation.

CHECK 2 ARE YOU ALERT ENOUGH?

Young people do not share their stories just like that. For this purpose, youth workers must create a context and they must be constantly alert for **signals**.

For instance, **Safe Space** non-profit organisation decided to open the house Covid-proof during the Covid period. After all, a great deal of young people indicated that they needed a place outside their family, a physical and mental space. Also the fact that all the professionals take part in the day-to-day organisation, means that they have more opportunities to build up trust and to pick up signals. Young people themselves are also engaged to follow and support other young people who are having a more difficult time, for instance via WhatsApp groups per age group.

CHECK 3

DO YOU CONSIDER YOUNG PEOPLE AS EQUALS?

Equality is the key to realising safety. This is only possible by taking the young people seriously and letting them help think and decide about the rules within the safe space, as we saw with the story of Saïda and **Safe Space** non-profit organisation.

The same applies to activists from **No child on the street**:

“ Young people do not stand above us, nor under us, but next to us! Giving as much autonomy as possible and giving as much respect as possible are the most important. For me too, it is the only way to work with young people. Because that is often precisely what they lack in everyday life. They find that here, and this is why it works.

THISKA, JONG GENT IN ACTIE
PROJECT SUPERVISOR

Equality depends on the mindset and the attitude of the youth worker. Young people notice immediately if the person they are talking to demands their respect, only just because he/she is older. This is why they often prefer to spend time with people whom they consider as ‘peers’, instead of people who appear to live outside and above their own world. This group can be broader than peers or friend groups and a youth worker can certainly belong to this. The attitude that the youth worker adopts allows them to assess to what extent he/she can be trusted and takes them seriously.”

CHECK 4

ARE YOU ON THE SIDE OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE?

Spending time with young people in brave spaces requires more than communicative skills. It requires much broader competences. Do you have attention for inequalities, exclusion and discrimination? Is this a standard attitude which you show **not just in words, but also in deeds?**

Young people who encounter injustice often feel safe with adults who are **role models** for them: people who are just as passionate as they themselves and share their beliefs and values. Someone who is active in a safe space because it happens to be his/her job does not belong there.

Ask yourself the question: am I on their side? And more importantly: do I also show that I am on their side? Do I support them and do I encourage them in the things that they find important? With an example: do I use my height to help them to reach the top?

CHECK 5 ARE YOU AWARE OF YOUR PRIVILEGED POSITION?

Because of course you have 'more height'. Often, you have a different, **more privileged background** than the young people with whom you work. Certainly in youth welfare work. This privileged background is not a personal success and also not something to feel guilty about.

But it is important to be aware that you have an advantage. Sometimes, it is thought that 'cultural' competences – the insight that various people also have various habits, views and values – are enough to deal with this as a youth worker. But that is not enough. Various people and groups also have as structural advantage or disadvantage due to their background or position.

In education, this can for instance mean that minorities have very different experiences at school. Often, they are not seen as the result of structural discrimination, but attributed to cultural or personal differences. The example of the **British university** illustrated this perfectly.

When you support young people in their fight against injustice, you must therefore **be aware** of your own position and of the privileges or advantages that you enjoy as a result.

CHECK 6 DO YOU YOURSELF EXPERIENCE YOUR WORK AS A SAFE SPACE?

The importance of a safe space does not only apply to young people, but **also to youth workers**. Do they receive enough trust and support from their colleagues and from the organisation? Or is the organisation under financial, political or other pressure? Is there room to exchange and to learn from each other?

Often as a youth worker you also work together with other organisations, teachers or healthcare professionals. Is there enough exchange and trust?

THINKING ABOUT YOUR POSITION

Have you already experienced discrimination? How?

- Have you or your family already had painful experiences with discrimination? Do they talk openly about it with you? Did they cry in your presence when they talked about it?
- Do you also invite people from other backgrounds to a party or birthday party?
- Do you follow the news when it is about injustice, racism, sexism, etc.?
- Outside your work, are you also involved with the themes which the young people with whom you work find important? Do you support them in this?
- If so, is this since you began working with them? What do you want to know more about? What have you already learned from them?

From the research work of Eri Park,
University College Roosevelt

WANTED



YOUTH WORKER (M/F/X)
WITH AN ENTHUSIASM
FOR POLITICISING WORK



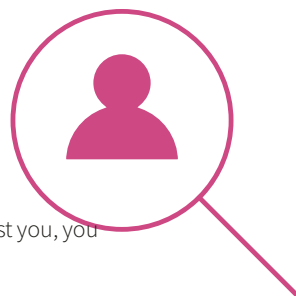
WE REQUIRE THAT

- you have faith in young people.
- you wish to create a bond with them, as a result of which they will also start to trust you, you have insight into their living environment.
- you have insight into mechanisms of social exclusion, you listen to their stories.
- you have the energy to set to work with this.
- you want to allow the voice of young people to be heard in order to fight that exclusion.

- you offer young people a safe space.
- you work together at their tempo. They are in support of you and your supporters, your starting point is their needs, requirements and interests.
- you always continue to motivate them. Sometimes, you must temper your expectations,
- you always continue to engage in dialogue with them, in a group or individually.
- you always adopt a respectful and positive attitude.

WE OFFER

- a challenging job.
- colleagues who support you.
- a complementary and diverse team.
- an organisation that chooses to allow the voice of young people to be heard.



Interreg 
2 Seas Mers Zeeën
ORPHEUS
European Regional Development Fund

The project ORPHEUS wishes to experiment with alternative forms of (offline and online) prevention of violent extremism in young people.

Central to this approach are safe spaces, in which young people work around themes which engage them and are supportive in expressing grievances. They are set up in such a way that they allow professionals to set to work in a positive way and instead of reacting repressively offer educational support.

On the one hand, they are closed spaces where a lab is set up for learning experiences, with a freedom of opinion which is not always possible in the outside world. On the other hand, these safe spaces are also connected to the outside world. In this sense, the lab is never completely closed. All the conflicts in society can just surface in the safe space and young people set to work with them.

From these labs, it is a small step to also make these grievances public in practices of politicising with and by young people.

The project develops offline and online safe spaces for and with young people. Videos and a training course have been developed for them. For supervisors, training courses have also been elaborated about enhancing safety in safe spaces, dealing with controversial issues, online literacy and cybercrime, youth culture and politicisation.

This casebook is linked to extra online material for supervisors and a manual for their trainers.

More info

[www. ORPHEUSPROJECT.EU](http://www.orpheusproject.eu)

Participating partners

