



REPORT FROM THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE

“Poke the Bubble – Regional Outreach Youth Work Network and Policy Dialogue” 24–25 June 2026

The regional **conference “Poke the Bubble – Regional Outreach Youth Work Network and Policy Dialogue”** took place on 24 and 25 June 2026 in Novi Sad, Serbia. The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding establishing the **Regional Outreach Youth Work Network** was organised on 24 June, while the main conference programme was held on 25 June at the **OPENS Youth Centre**. The conference was organised by the Centre for Youth Work (**CZOR**) from Novi Sad, in partnership with **SIT** – Centre for Counselling, Social Services and Research from Pristina and **Forum MNE** from Podgorica.

The conference was organised as part of the wider initiative “Poke the Bubble – Gender Mobile Youth Clubs for the New Good Neighbourly Social Initiatives between Serbia and Kosovo*”, implemented by CZOR and SIT with the **support of the European Union**. The regional dimension of the initiative was further strengthened through the financial **support of the Western Balkans Fund**, within the Matching Grant Scheme, under the project “Poke the Bubble – Regional Outreach Youth Work Network and Policy Dialogue”. This support enabled the expansion of the existing bilateral cooperation through the involvement of Forum MNE from Montenegro and the establishment of a broader regional cooperation framework.

The project builds on the experience **of applying outreach and gender-sensitive youth work approaches to reach young people who are insufficiently included in existing services, programmes and decision-making processes**. It also responds to the need for stronger recognition of outreach youth work, enhanced cooperation among youth work practitioners and organisations, and more sustainable institutional support for reaching young people facing social exclusion, unemployment and disengagement.

The regional conference brought together **young people, youth workers and representatives of civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders** from Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro.

The event provided an opportunity to:

- **present key experiences** and lessons learned from the implementation of outreach and gender-sensitive youth work programmes;
- **exchange practices and discuss challenges** related to reaching young people outside existing systems and services;
- **strengthen regional cooperation** among youth work organisations and practitioners;
- establish the Regional Outreach Youth Work Network through the **signing of a Memorandum of Understanding**;
- **develop youth and practitioners’ messages and policy recommendations** for the stronger recognition, sustainability and further development of outreach youth work at local, national and regional levels.



The main conference programme was **hosted by Nataša Marjanović, a volunteer of the Centre for Youth Work – CZOR**, who welcomed participants from Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro and introduced the objectives, structure and wider project context of the event.

She emphasized that the conference would focus on how outreach youth work can better reach young people who remain outside existing services, programmes and institutional support systems, as well as on the stronger recognition and further development of gender-sensitive outreach youth work across the region.

The participants were first addressed by **Richard Masa, Head of Operations Section II at the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia**. Mr Masa spoke about the very concrete and personal role youth workers can have in the lives of young people from socially isolated communities. **For many of them, youth workers are the first trusted adults who are ready to listen, offer support and help them recognise opportunities they may not have believed were available to them.** He noted that this kind of **impact cannot always be captured through numbers**, but it can change the direction of a young person's life. He also stressed that investing in young people means investing in the future and that every young person should have the opportunity to participate, contribute and progress, regardless of their background or circumstances. Referring to the title of the project, Mr Masa pointed out that **"Poke the Bubble" reflects something that lies at the heart of quality youth work: helping young people step beyond the boundaries created by stereotypes, misinformation and social pressure.**

The conference was officially opened by **Vanja Kalaba, Executive Director of the Centre for Youth Work – CZOR**, who focused on the importance of reaching young people in the places and communities where they live, rather than expecting all of them to come to existing organisations and institutions. **"If we want to create change, we cannot expect all young people to come to us. We must be prepared to go to them."**

She highlighted that the project specifically demonstrated how outreach youth work can be applied not only in employment, health promotion and prevention, but also in the field of gender equality. Through the project, practical tools and methodology were developed, eight organisations from Serbia and Kosovo* were trained, and more than 200 young people from disadvantaged communities were reached. The lesson, she stressed, was clear: outreach works.

Ms Kalaba noted that almost every institution is now asking the same question: how can we reach young people? **For this reason, outreach, detached, mobile and street-based youth work are becoming increasingly important ways of connecting young people with opportunities, services and institutions.** She also referred to the Memorandum of Understanding signed the previous day by ten organisations from Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo*, establishing the first regional network dedicated to these forms of youth work. Referring to recent events in Serbia, Ms Kalaba stressed that young people are willing to engage when they care about an issue. As she noted, **"Our responsibility is to ensure that every young person has the opportunity, support and confidence to do so."**

Following the opening remarks, participants watched a short film presenting the wider project context and experiences from its three-year implementation. The film screening served as an introduction to the panel discussion that followed.



Panel discussion: Outreach youth work, gender-sensitive approaches and regional cooperation

The panel discussion, moderated by **Milica Lekić**, youth worker at the Centre for Youth Work (CZOR) and former beneficiary of the CZOR's youth programme, brought together representatives of the three partner organisations to reflect on the barriers preventing young people from accessing youth work, the capacities of outreach approach, and on the role of regional cooperation in addressing these challenges.

The discussion opened with the reasons **why many young people remain outside the reach** of standard programmes. Participants highlighted geographical and economic barriers, social norms, stereotypes and a lack of trust in institutions and service providers. It was emphasised that meaningful engagement requires first building relationships and trust within communities before expecting young people to participate in organised activities.

Reflecting on the value of outreach youth work, **Dajna Marinković (CZOR)** highlighted that outreach should not be understood as an activity linked to a specific topic, but **"as a methodology that can be applied across different fields of youth work"**. At the same time, organisations often struggle to implement **quality outreach due to insufficient funding, limited human resources and capacities, and institutional reluctance to move beyond established ways of working**. She stressed that youth work must remain flexible, ethical and responsive to the realities of young people's lives, ensuring that programmes are relevant rather than designed solely around organisational priorities.

Drawing on CZOR's experience of working with Roma girls, **she also highlighted that building trust within communities requires time, consistency and long-term commitment**. Outreach youth work is a demanding process that cannot be achieved through short-term interventions alone, but through sustained engagement and relationship-building.

Speaking about gender-sensitive youth work, **Liridona Berisha (SIT)** underlined that gender sensitivity should not be seen as an additional project component but as **"a lens that should shape the way we plan, communicate, implement and evaluate our work."** Gender equality is not only about women and girls, but about the dignity, safety, freedom and participation of everyone. It is about whether girls feel safe to speak, whether boys can express emotions without being judged, whether young women are taken seriously in decision-making, and whether young men can build identities that are not based on control, pressure or violence. She explained that youth work can provide a safe space in which young people question messages such as "boys should always be strong", "girls should stay quiet" or "jealousy is love". A gender-sensitive approach is not about blaming young people for the stereotypes they have grown up with but about helping them recognise and question those stereotypes and build relationships based on consent, respect, equality and responsibility. She also warned that anti-gender narratives increasingly use fear and misinformation to present equality and human rights as a threat. In this context, **gender-sensitive youth work also has an important preventive role: it strengthens critical thinking, encourages empathy and creates space for dialogue instead of polarisation**.

Addressing the regional perspective, **Andjelija Lučić (Forum MNE)** pointed out that around 30% of young people in Montenegro report feeling socially excluded, which points that many young people remain outside youth workers' reach. The implementation of the Youth Guarantee has brought public attention to particularly outreach youth work and demonstrated that youth work is a powerful tool for engaging young people who are often overlooked and for addressing challenges such as social exclusion, unemployment, and disengagement. At the same time, it also exposed one



of the **biggest challenges—the lack of qualified human resources** capable of delivering quality youth work and outreach activities. **Forum MNE has invested significant efforts in strengthening the community of youth work practitioners** and advocating for the professionalisation of youth work. One important milestone was supporting the establishment of the Professional Association of Youth Work Practitioners in Montenegro. **Learning from Serbia's experience**, specially CZOR and National Association of Youth Workers (NAPOR), helped avoiding many of the challenges. “I believe this perfectly illustrates the value of regional cooperation. **While each Western Balkan country has its own specific context, young people across the region face remarkably similar challenges—social exclusion, unequal access to services, limited opportunities in rural areas, and insufficient recognition of youth work. We can learn from one another's successes, adapt proven methodologies, and avoid repeating the same mistakes.**”

The panel concluded with a discussion involving participants, highlighting the importance of moving beyond short-term project support towards long-term investment in safe spaces based on co-management principles. ***It was emphasised that outreach and detached youth work should be embedded as integral approaches within these spaces, enabling organisations to build trust, remain present in communities, and respond to the diverse needs of young people.***

WORKING GROUP SESSIONS

Following the panel discussion, participants continued their work in four parallel working groups: two groups composed primarily of young people and two groups bringing together youth workers and representatives of civil society organisations. The groups were facilitated through participatory and non-formal learning methods, including introductory activities, attitude barometers, guided discussion, mapping exercises and small-group work.

The working sessions were organised in two parts. During the first part, participants reflected on the current situation, identifying which young people are most likely to remain outside existing programmes and support systems, the barriers that prevent their participation, and the ways in which gender norms and stereotypes influence access to opportunities. The second part focused on possible solutions and recommendations for improving the quality, accessibility, recognition and sustainability of outreach youth work.

WORKING GROUPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Two parallel working groups brought together young participants from Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro. The sessions were based on non-formal learning and participatory methods, including introductory and team-building activities, an attitude barometer, communication exercises, facilitated discussion and small-group work.

The first group began by exploring young people's needs in their communities and discussing whether they have access to safe spaces, opportunities to develop their potential and adequate support. Participants then reflected on which groups of young people are particularly vulnerable to exclusion, what prevents them from becoming more involved in community life and what kind of support is missing.

The second group used the idea of the “bubble” as a starting point for examining how young people's social, cultural and personal environments shape their attitudes, expectations and



opportunities. Participants reflected on their comfort zones, the stereotypes present in their communities and the differences in opportunities available to young people depending on where they live.

Main Challenges Identified by Young People

Young participants identified **social isolation, financial difficulties and limited access** to activities and opportunities as some of the main barriers to participation. They stressed that young people **from rural and remote areas** often have fewer opportunities than those living in larger towns and cities. Place of residence can significantly influence **access to education, youth exchanges, mobility programmes, scholarships and other forms of personal and professional** development.

Participants also highlighted the social exclusion experienced by **young people with disabilities, survivors of abuse and other vulnerable and marginalised groups**. In addition to practical and financial barriers, many young people experience **social anxiety, fear of judgement and a feeling that they are not heard, seen or taken seriously**.

A lack of emotional and psychological support was recognised as an important gap. Young people often need **trusted individuals with whom they can speak openly**, including friends, peers, youth workers, mentors and psychologists. They also need **spaces in which they feel accepted and included** without fear of being judged.

When spoke about gender inequality participants noted **that girls and young women in some communities do not have enough opportunities** to express their potential, take leadership roles or feel safe. **Gender expectations and other social norms** can therefore further limit participation and personal development.

Young people also identified **weak institutional support, political influence, outdated approaches to youth engagement and limited participation in decision-making** as key barriers. A significant part of the discussion focused on the **low level of trust** young people have in public institutions. Participants stressed that trust cannot be built through one-off activities, but requires **transparency, regular communication, meaningful participation and sustained engagement** over time.

The discussions showed that **young people are often expected to “figure things out” on their own**, particularly when dealing with formal education, institutional procedures or access to opportunities. This can be **especially difficult for those who do not have family, school or community support**.

What Matters to Young People

Across both groups, participants highlighted several needs and priorities:

- access to education, healthcare, financial assistance and opportunities for participation;
- timely and reliable information about programmes, scholarships, exchanges and other opportunities;
- safe, inclusive and non-judgemental spaces;
- emotional support and a sense of belonging;
- trusted people with whom they can speak openly;
- being listened to, accepted and taken seriously;
- opportunities to participate, lead initiatives and contribute to their communities;
- quality formal and non-formal education;



- peer support and peer education.

Participants stressed that **information alone is not always enough**. Young people may also need **encouragement, mentoring and practical support** to understand procedures, apply for opportunities and communicate with institutions.

Peer education and support are recognised as particularly valuable. Young people are often more receptive to information and experiences shared by other young people. Peer support can therefore contribute to greater trust, motivation and participation.

Participants also emphasised that **youth work in smaller communities can have a long-term impact**. By helping young people access information, education and experiences beyond their immediate environment, youth work can support them to develop new skills and later contribute to their own communities.

Messages to Youth Workers, Organisations and Institutions

The two groups developed several common messages for those responsible for supporting young people:

- 1) Youth workers, organisations and institutions should create safe and inclusive environments in which every young person feels heard, respected and valued. Particular attention should be given to young people from rural areas, young people with disabilities, survivors of abuse and others facing multiple barriers to participation.
- 2) Support should respond to the whole person rather than focusing only on participation in individual activities. This includes access to emotional and psychological support, education, healthcare, financial assistance and meaningful opportunities to take part in community life.
- 3) Young people should be actively involved in decisions that affect them. They should have opportunities not only to attend activities, but also to help identify needs, shape programmes, take leadership roles and influence institutional decisions.
- 4) Institutions should improve transparency and communication and remain engaged over time. Trust is built when young people see that their views are taken seriously and that participation leads to visible responses.

Finally, youth workers were **encouraged to remain committed, persistent and open-minded**. The direct messages formulated by one of the groups were:

“Do your job properly.”

“Never give up.”

“Be open-minded.”

These messages reflected young people’s expectation that youth workers provide high-quality and reliable support, continue working even when engagement is difficult, and remain responsive to the diverse needs and experiences of young people.

Conclusions

The two youth groups showed that young people’s exclusion is not caused by a lack of interest or motivation alone. Participation is affected by unequal access to opportunities, financial difficulties, geographical isolation, social norms, weak institutional support and the absence of safe and trusted spaces.



Young people need more than occasional activities. They need continuity, reliable information, emotional support, opportunities to participate meaningfully and trusted people who will remain present over time.

The discussions also confirmed that outreach youth work has a particularly important role in smaller, rural and marginalised communities. By meeting young people in their own environments, providing individual support and connecting them with opportunities, youth workers can help reduce inequalities and strengthen young people's confidence, participation and contribution to community development.

WORKING GROUPS WITH YOUTH WORKERS, CSOs, OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Two parallel working groups brought together youth workers, representatives of civil society organisations and other youth care stakeholders from Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro. Their task was to examine outreach youth work from two complementary perspectives and to move from identifying current challenges towards developing concrete recommendations for its stronger recognition, quality and sustainability.

The first group focused on **outreach approaches and gender-sensitive work with young people**. Participants discussed which young people most often remain outside existing programmes and support services, what prevents youth workers from reaching them and building trust, and how gender norms and different life circumstances influence access and participation. The group also considered which outreach methods and good practices already exist and what is still needed to make this work safer, more inclusive, better supported and more sustainable.

The second group focused on **systemic recognition, regional cooperation and the role of the newly established network**. Participants examined how visible and recognised outreach youth work is within local and national systems, what limits its institutional recognition and long-term financing, and where stronger links can be built with youth policy, education, social protection, employment services and local authorities. They also reflected on existing examples of cooperation across Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro and on the role regional networking can play in sharing resources, strengthening practice and supporting joint advocacy.

In the second part of the working process, both groups translated the identified challenges into recommendations. They considered whom each recommendation should address, what the first realistic steps could be, what resources and cooperation would be needed for implementation, how gender sensitivity and youth participation could be integrated, and how the Regional Outreach Youth Work Network could support progress at regional level.

Main Challenges Identified

❖ Young people who remain outside support systems

Participants identified several groups of young people who are particularly likely to remain outside youth programmes, public services and other support mechanisms:

- young people living in rural and remote areas;
- NEET youth who are disconnected from education, employment and institutions;
- Roma youth;



- young people from ethnic and linguistic minority communities;
- young people with disabilities and other marginalised groups;
- young people in conflict with the law, in correctional or specialised institutions, or involved in restorative justice programmes;
- young parents, particularly young mothers;
- young people who lack family, emotional or community support.

The reasons for exclusion are interconnected. They include geographical isolation, poor transport and digital infrastructure, poverty, discrimination, social stigma, limited access to information and a lack of services adapted to young people's specific circumstances. Participants also noted that youth workers and institutions do not always have the language skills, cultural knowledge, mandate or professional capacities needed to reach and support particular groups.

❖ **Unequal access to outreach youth work**

A major challenge is the unequal availability of youth work between urban and rural areas. Young people in smaller and remote communities often depend on occasional project activities, while regular services, youth-friendly spaces and transport connections are limited or unavailable.

Even where spaces exist, young people do not always experience them as safe, welcoming or belonging to them. This confirms the importance of bringing youth work directly to communities rather than relying only on programmes delivered in established youth centres.

❖ **Shortage of youth workers and limited professional support**

Participants identified a shortage of trained youth workers. In some contexts, one practitioner is expected to cover several municipalities, target groups or areas of work. This makes regular community presence and long-term relationship-building difficult.

Youth workers are expected to adapt to young people's schedules, work in the field and respond to complex needs, often without sufficient training, supervision, mentoring or stable employment. Participants also referred to declining motivation and the risk of burnout among practitioners.

Professional recognition remains uneven, while shared standards and clearly defined competences for outreach youth work are still insufficiently developed.

❖ **Dependence on short-term project funding**

Short-term and inadequate funding was repeatedly identified as one of the main barriers to quality outreach work.

Building trust requires continuity and regular presence, but programmes often end before relationships with young people are fully established. Staff changes and unstable employment further interrupt the support process.

Short funding cycles also limit investment in needs assessment, transport, safeguarding, supervision, follow-up and impact measurement. Outreach youth work is therefore frequently treated as a temporary project activity rather than a long-term component of youth support systems.

❖ **Weak institutional recognition and cross-sector cooperation**

Both groups concluded that outreach youth work is increasingly recognised by practitioners and young people as effective, but still lacks sufficient recognition in public policies, institutional procedures and budget planning.

Cooperation between youth organisations, schools, social services, municipalities, employment services, health institutions and other relevant actors remains uneven. It often depends on individual professionals rather than on established procedures, clear responsibilities and referral pathways.



Participants also pointed to administrative burdens and the risk that civil society organisations are expected to compensate for gaps in public services. Outreach youth work should connect young people with institutions and complement their services, but should not replace institutional responsibilities.

❖ **Low levels of trust**

Low trust in institutions and professionals was recognised as one of the main barriers to reaching young people.

Participants stressed that trust requires long-term presence, reliability and a genuine understanding of local communities. Occasional visits and one-off activities cannot replace sustained relationship-building.

Parents' attitudes and limited understanding of youth work may also discourage participation. In some communities, youth organisations are viewed with suspicion or portrayed as politically influenced or as "foreign agents", further weakening public trust.

❖ **Limited recognition and visibility of youth work**

Youth work remains insufficiently understood outside the youth sector. Its educational, preventive and social inclusion roles are often less visible than individual events or recreational activities.

Weak public understanding contributes to limited institutional support, insufficient funding and low professional recognition. Participants also highlighted weak media promotion and limited communication capacities among youth organisations.

Misinformation can further damage trust, while organisations often lack the resources and skills needed for continuous and coordinated public communication.

❖ **Gender-related barriers**

Participants observed differences in the participation of young women and young men.

Young women often participate more actively in youth programmes, while traditional masculinity norms and peer pressure may discourage boys and young men from becoming involved. Participation may be perceived as "uncool" or inconsistent with expected male roles.

At the same time, young women and young mothers may face family and caregiving responsibilities that limit their availability. Safety concerns and social expectations may also affect their ability to participate and take leadership roles.

Participants stressed that outreach programmes should recognise these different realities and intentionally adapt activities, schedules and communication methods.

❖ **Limited evidence and impact measurement**

Participants identified a lack of practical tools for measuring and communicating the impact of outreach youth work.

Existing reporting often focuses on the number of activities and participants, while changes in trust, confidence, social inclusion, access to services and institutional cooperation remain less visible.

Without stronger evidence, it is more difficult to advocate for formal recognition, public financing and long-term institutional support.

Existing Practices and Resources

The groups also identified practices that provide a foundation for further development.



Mobile youth clubs were highlighted as a useful way of bringing activities directly to rural and underserved communities. Young Men's Clubs in Kosovo* were recognised as supportive spaces in which boys and young men can discuss gender norms, mental health and other social issues.

The Doughnut Methodology was mentioned as a tool for understanding different levels of youth participation and developing more targeted outreach approaches. Service-learning was also valued for connecting community engagement with formal and non-formal learning.

Participants emphasised that effective outreach is based on regular presence, informal communication and sustained relationship-building rather than isolated activities.

Existing examples of cooperation between civil society organisations, schools, social services, municipalities and employment services were seen as a basis for developing more integrated support systems. Resource mapping, intersectoral working groups, advocacy initiatives, memoranda of understanding and youth spaces were identified as practices that could be adapted and strengthened across the region.

Recommendations from Youth Workers and Civil Society Organisations

✓ Strengthen early prevention and reach young people before exclusion deepens

Participants emphasised the need to move from reacting to exclusion towards earlier and more coordinated prevention. Local authorities, schools, social services, employment services, health institutions and youth organisations all have a role in identifying young people who are at risk of becoming disconnected from education, employment and community life.

Outreach youth workers can help establish contact, build trust and connect young people with available support. However, their role is complementary: public institutions remain responsible for providing services within their mandates and responding to the needs identified through outreach work.

Stronger prevention requires regular cooperation at the local level, clear responsibilities and mechanisms that allow youth workers and institutions to exchange relevant information and coordinate support while respecting confidentiality and data protection.

✓ Secure long-term and stable financing for outreach youth work

Youth workers and civil society representatives identified short-term project funding as one of the greatest barriers to effective outreach work. Public authorities, the European Union, donors and other funding bodies need to recognise that trust and continuity cannot be achieved through isolated activities or brief project cycles.

Longer-term funding mechanisms are needed for programmes that maintain a regular presence in communities, particularly in rural, remote and marginalised areas. Financial support also needs to cover the work that takes place before and after direct activities with young people, including:

- community mapping and needs assessment;
- transport and mobile outreach;
- safeguarding and risk management;
- supervision, mentoring and professional development;
- follow-up work and cooperation with institutions;
- monitoring and impact measurement.



Youth organisations and networks can contribute by coordinating resources, developing joint programmes and demonstrating the results of long-term outreach work. Funders, however, remain central to creating conditions in which these programmes can continue beyond a single project.

✓ **Integrate outreach youth work into youth policies and public support systems**

Participants stressed that outreach, detached, mobile and street-based youth work already exist in practice, but remain insufficiently recognised in policies, institutional procedures and public budgets. National ministries, local authorities and other institutions responsible for youth need to include these approaches in youth strategies, action plans and local support systems. Their role should be clearly linked to the prevention of social exclusion and to connecting young people with education, employment, health, social protection and participation opportunities.

Professional associations, youth organisations and national youth councils can support this process by providing expertise, mapping existing practices and advocating for clearer definitions and recognition. Formal integration would also make it easier to define responsibilities, establish cooperation and allocate public resources.

✓ **Develop common quality standards and stronger professional support**

Quality outreach work depends on practitioners who are trained, supported and able to respond to complex situations. Professional youth work associations, training providers, relevant public authorities and experienced youth organisations therefore need to work together on shared standards for outreach, detached, mobile and street-based youth work.

These standards need to address professional competences, ethical practice, safeguarding, data protection, gender sensitivity, work with young people at risk, cooperation with institutions and documentation of outcomes.

Youth organisations, as employers and programme providers, have a particular responsibility to provide regular supervision, mentoring and peer support. Public authorities and funders need to recognise these costs as necessary elements of quality youth work rather than optional project expenses.

Participants also underlined the importance of decent working conditions. Outreach work often requires evening work, travel, flexibility and sustained emotional engagement. Stable contracts, adequate compensation and measures to prevent burnout are therefore essential for retaining skilled practitioners.

✓ **Establish structured cooperation**

Young people's needs often involve several systems at the same time. Schools, social services, health institutions, employment services, municipalities and youth organisations may all be relevant, but cooperation between them is still frequently informal and dependent on individual contacts.

Local authorities are best placed to convene these actors and establish regular intersectoral cooperation. This can include designated contact persons, agreed referral procedures, joint mapping of services and clear arrangements for follow-up and feedback.

Youth workers can act as trusted links between young people and institutions, especially when young people are reluctant to approach formal services directly. Nevertheless, they cannot take over the responsibilities of specialised institutions. Clear referral pathways are therefore necessary both to protect young people and to prevent youth workers from being expected to respond beyond their role and competences.

✓ **Expand outreach services in rural and underserved communities**



Participants identified major differences between urban areas and smaller, rural or remote communities. Local and national authorities, together with youth organisations, need to invest in models that bring youth work closer to young people rather than expecting young people to travel to existing centres.

Mobile youth clubs, detached work, community-based activities and multidisciplinary field teams were identified as useful approaches. Schools, community centres and other accessible local spaces can also be used where dedicated youth facilities do not exist.

Programme design needs to be based on local needs assessments and direct consultation with young people. Transport, language, accessibility, cultural context and the places where young people already gather all need to be considered. Youth workers and local organisations are particularly important in adapting broader methodologies to the realities of individual communities.

✓ **Embed gender-sensitive and inclusive practice throughout outreach work**

Youth organisations, programme managers and institutions commissioning youth services need to treat gender sensitivity as a principle that shapes the whole programme rather than as a separate activity.

This means examining how gender norms affect who participates, who feels safe, who has time available and who is encouraged to take leadership roles. Programmes need to recognise, for example, the caregiving responsibilities often carried by young women and young mothers, as well as the peer pressure and traditional masculinity norms that may discourage boys and young men from seeking support.

Youth workers are responsible for translating these principles into daily practice by adapting activities, communication methods, schedules and group processes. Organisations and institutions need to provide the training, resources and monitoring frameworks that make this possible.

Specialised gender equality organisations and young people themselves can contribute to programme design and evaluation, helping ensure that approaches respond to actual experiences rather than assumptions.

✓ **Involve young people as partners rather than only as beneficiaries**

Participants agreed that young people need to be included throughout programme development, from identifying needs and choosing topics to implementing activities and evaluating results.

Youth organisations and public institutions are responsible for creating these opportunities, while youth workers support young people to take on roles that match their interests and readiness. Clear pathways can help young people move from initial participation towards peer education, leadership, advocacy and decision-making.

Meaningful participation also requires feedback. When young people share ideas or raise concerns, institutions and organisations need to explain how those contributions were used and what changes followed. Without this, consultation risks becoming symbolic and may further weaken trust.

✓ **Improve impact measurement and the evidence base**

Participants highlighted that the value of outreach youth work is often difficult to communicate because existing reporting systems focus mainly on participant numbers and completed activities.

Youth organisations, public institutions, professional associations and research bodies need to develop practical tools that also capture changes in trust, confidence, participation, access to services, social inclusion and institutional cooperation.

Youth workers have an important role in documenting processes and outcomes, while organisations need to provide simple systems that do not create excessive administrative burdens. Funders and



institutions can support this by accepting qualitative evidence, case studies and longer-term indicators alongside quantitative data.

A stronger evidence base would support programme improvement, public communication and advocacy for more sustainable financing and institutional recognition.

✓ **Strengthen public understanding and recognition of youth work**

Youth work organisations, professional associations and public institutions responsible for youth need to communicate more clearly what youth work is and what it contributes to young people and communities.

Participants recommended presenting concrete examples of how youth work supports inclusion, prevention, education, employability, participation and access to services. Young people need to be involved as co-creators of messages, since their experiences make communication more credible and relevant.

Youth organisations also need stronger capacities in digital communication, social media and strategic storytelling. Schools, local authorities and media can help extend the reach of these messages and respond to misinformation.

Regional and national campaigns can contribute to the recognition of youth work both as a profession and as a service of public interest.

✓ **Use the regional network for learning, advocacy and resource sharing**

Member organisations of the newly established Regional Outreach Youth Work Network have a central role in maintaining cooperation beyond the conference and individual projects.

The network can provide a framework for exchanging methodologies and practical tools, organising peer learning, supporting youth workers and documenting examples from Serbia, Kosovo* and Montenegro. It can also coordinate common advocacy messages towards institutions and donors.

Participants identified several possible areas of joint work:

- developing shared terminology and quality principles;
- organising training, study visits and peer exchanges;
- collecting and promoting effective regional practices;
- developing joint awareness and advocacy initiatives;
- preparing regional projects and funding applications;
- involving young people in regional dialogue and decision-making.

Professional associations, public institutions, donors and research organisations can support these efforts through expertise, recognition and resources. The sustainability of the network, however, will also depend on clear priorities, regular communication and shared responsibility among its members.

Conclusions

The two groups confirmed that outreach youth work is an effective approach for reaching young people who remain outside existing programmes and services. Its full potential, however, is limited by unstable funding, weak institutional recognition, insufficient professional support, unequal territorial coverage and fragmented cooperation between sectors.

Participants agreed that outreach youth work should be developed as a long-term, preventive and relationship-based component of wider youth support systems. This requires stable financing,



trained and supported practitioners, common quality standards, structured cooperation with institutions and stronger public recognition.

At the same time, outreach work must remain flexible and adapted to the realities of different communities and groups of young people. Regional cooperation can contribute to this process by enabling organisations to exchange knowledge, share resources and advocate jointly for the recognition, quality and sustainability of outreach youth work.

Overall Conclusions from the Working Groups

The discussions in all four working groups showed a high level of agreement between young people, youth workers and civil society representatives. Although they approached the topic from different perspectives, they identified many of the same priorities: safe and accessible spaces, long-term support, reliable information, meaningful youth participation, stronger institutional cooperation and sustainable investment in outreach youth work.

Young people placed particular emphasis on trust, emotional support, equal access to opportunities and being heard without judgement. Youth workers and civil society representatives focused more strongly on the structural conditions needed to make this possible, including stable financing, professional recognition, quality standards, supervision, cross-sector cooperation and stronger public understanding of youth work.

Taken together, the findings confirmed that effective outreach youth work depends on both quality relationships with young people and supportive systems around those relationships. These conclusions provided the basis for the regional policy recommendations developed through the project and for the future work of the Regional Outreach Youth Work Network.

Centre for Youth Work, Novi Sad, July 2026.

For any additional information regarding the report from the conference, we are at your disposal: Violeta Stanković (Centre for Youth Work), 063/454-662, violeta.stankovic@czor.org