

Sweden: Salutogenic Approach to Open Youth Work

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Today, we introduce to you **Diana Pettersson Svenneke** and **Pepe Herrera** - a coordinator and a youth worker at the KC network in Sweden. They will talk to us about using salutogenic approach (promotion of health) to youth work and why it is important to focus on health factors that makes us function optimally. They will discuss the benefits of promotion vs. prevention and introduce their tool for promoting youth work in everyday life.

Q: How long have you been involved in the project?

A: Our project was not part of EGL since the get-go. We started developing our model in 2008 and decided to update it in 2016. We were a group of 6 people that produced new material and held workshops for all youth workers in our organisations. Our network, the *KC network for development of open youth work* is also a member of Inter City Youth, which is a member of EGL. During the Inter City

Youth Conference in Thessaloniki in 2018, we held a workshop that caught the interest of some EGL members. That is how we got invited to Brussels in June of this year. The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society decided to join the project in June 2019, something that means that our work can also get national support.

Q: What is a salutogenic approach to open youth work?

A: When Aron Antonovsky presented the salutogenic theory ('Unraveling the mystery of health', 1987), he focused on the aspect of our lives that contributes to our well-being and resilience, regardless of what the situations around us is. He called this feeling a 'sense of coherence'. Antonovsky found that we need to experience our existence as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. Basically, to be able to understand different situations and scenarios around us and have the skills and tools to adequately respond, engage and get involved in them.

In a similar fashion, when youth workers are asked about what motivates them to work with young people, most of them talk about happiness, engagement, development, creation. In that sense, they can support young people by offering information and counselling about opportunities and society in general, to motivate young people to discover and learn new skills, empower them to achieve their own goals - both on their own or together with other people.

Q: What is something about this project that you want to highlight? What are some aspects that make it unique?

A: It is a practical model, based on research that structures, implements and evaluates youth work practices. Our promotion approach is rooted in common universal values (HRRR, Convention of the Rights of the Child and European laws and policies) and calls for the inclusion of ALL young people as it tries to meet them with positive expectations, looks for their resources, creates possibilities for participation and focuses on their empowerment while helping to increase resilience to cope with life's difficulties.

Q: Why is it important to talk about promotion vs. prevention?

A: Promoting youth work requires a humanistic and democratic vision of young people as active and capable individuals with rights who must be involved in making decisions about their own lives. This is well supported by international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, European Youth Policies and Recommendations and the European Charter on Local Youth Work. These rights are universal, and the policies implemented must reach all young people. Although the prevention work is also necessary, it runs the risk of focusing on a small group of individuals who, based on changing criteria, society considers part of some measures. If there is too much focus on prevention we run the risk of creating negative expectations on young people.

Youth work should reach ALL young people and focus on offering opportunities for their well-being and development. Our salutogenic approach is inclusive and allows for young people with fewer opportunities to be included and considered active members of society and part of the future.

It is important to note that promoting youth work can be preventive but prevention might not necessarily create health, a sense of coherence or guarantee development. We consider that promoting youth work does not contradict other forms of intervention and is simply a different

approach that society must offer young people who are in different phases of their lives and may be going through different personal situations and issues.

However, in a time of economic recession, social welfare cuts and questioning of youth work, we don't forget about social issues, such as increased number of mental health cases, physical inactivity, economic inequality, etc. For those reasons, we would like to challenge the prevention norm.

Q: Can you summarize the impact of the project so far? What are its biggest accomplishments?

A: Yes, the model is based on youth rights. It considers, honours and values young people as an important resource in our society. The model offers both a theoretical and practical approach for youth workers. Thanks to it, by distinguishing the difference between promotion and prevention, our youth workers have become more confident about their own role and expertise. They can easily describe their mission and tasks to other stakeholders such as parents, council departments, authorities, etc. That way, youth workers' role in the community gets recognition and is well-established. Using a promotion approach in youth work also raises awareness about the importance of youth participation and brings focus on young people's empowerment.

Q: What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced so far?

A: There are several challenges. One is the diversity of conditions and situations in the different municipalities and regions such as staff, economy, co-operation among existing services, etc. Also, some long-term projects and long-term results are more difficult to measure. And lastly, cooperation with other stakeholders can be time consuming.

Q: What is the vision of the project?

A: Our vision aims to support a promotion approach to young people and their issues by presenting a standard measure for quality youth work. We want to offer a practical tool for youth workers that creates opportunities for young people to be healthy and enjoy their lives. We want to actively contribute to a society where there is a meaningful youth inclusion and participation. A society in which young people have a sound understanding of the world, have tools to manage their reality and lead meaningful lives. We want to ensure that with our support, they feel and are in charge of their lives and well-being.

Would you like to read the short introduction of Diana and Pepe? [Read his short introduction as part of the 'Faces of EGL' series!](#)