

2.1 General context

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Historical developments

Specifically concerning the development of youth voluntary work, little information could be found. However, Flanders has a rich and long tradition of volunteering in youth work. Although youth work is done by thousands of young volunteers, they do not consider themselves as volunteers. **Subsidiary and pillarisation** At the end of the 19th century, Belgian society was characterised by the principles of subsidiarity and pillarisation.

- The principle of *subsidiarity* means that state intervention was limited to the recognition and encouragement of the actions of essentially private operators, including associations.
- This went hand in hand with a relatively compartmentalised society, or *pillarisation*, based on three major ideological movements: Catholics, Liberals and Socialists. Citizens evolved around these politically marked pillars and all their associations (school establishment, health care funds, workers federations, trade unions, leisure time and so forth), which organised social life according to the same ideology.

As a result, the state tended to delegate a large part of its policies to the pillars, especially concerning youth. Voluntary activities were mainly developed through catholic and socialist movements, in the shape of charitable or philanthropic initiatives. **From charity towards self-fulfilment** Gradually, a shift could be noticed from the altruist initiatives of middle-class citizens (often women) targeted at families in poverty, towards activities that can also contribute to the self-fulfilment of the volunteer. Volunteering became an important way to participate in society and an instrument of social integration. More and more, participation in voluntary work became more important than the ideological message or the connection to one of the pillars. Public authorities increasingly encouraged voluntary activities, under which voluntary work in the youth sector. **A political evolution** The UN International Year of Volunteers 2001 was an important trigger in Belgium. Public authorities became aware of the interest in voluntary activities and the necessity to think about a legal framework. During this year, the federal level took formal initiatives to improve the social and legal situation of volunteers. In 2005, the Act on the rights of volunteers has been adopted.

Main concepts

There is no specific definition of youth volunteering. However, the law related to volunteer's rights of 3 July 2005 introduced a common definition to be shared by everyone involved in voluntary work, included youth work. It defines volunteering as follows:

- Volunteering is unpaid;
- it does not involve obligation;
- it is undertaken for others or for society;
- there should be always a distinction between volunteering and professional activities.