



Bureau Position Paper on the Commission Consultation on “active inclusion”

Introduction

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) welcomes the debate launched by the European Commission on the most appropriate action at EU level to promote active inclusion of the people furthest from the labour market. Through this paper, the European Youth Forum stresses the need for the European Union to engage in specific actions to meet the increasing challenges to young peoples' inclusion in European society, including the realities they are facing to get integrated in the European labour market.

'The YFJ is a pan-European platform with 93 Member Organisations - national youth councils and international non-governmental youth organisations. The Youth Forum aims to empower young people to participate actively in the shaping of Europe and the society in which they live. Through our Member Organisations and our representative role, we want to improve the living conditions of all young people in Europe, to channel the flow of information, interests and opinions between young people and international institutions (the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations) and to promote the development of youth and student work in Europe and internationally.'

When considering youth employment, it is important to implement actions that can reverse grave figures of youth unemployment and social exclusion. Indeed, with more than 18% of active young people in the EU unemployed and 19% of young people in the EU at risk of falling into poverty, the time has come to put words into action and develop ambitious targeted policies on youth employment. Without rapid progress in this regard, the challenges faced by European youth will quickly have a negative impact on the European Union as a whole. Indeed, the social situation of youth has effects on the ability of society as a whole to be innovative, while embracing the future in a positive way¹.

The follow up of the present consultation on the "active inclusion of people the furthest from the labour market" will be an opportunity to apply the principle of "youth mainstreaming" that was established by the European Council when it launched the European Youth Pact in 2005. The European Youth Forum welcomed the fact that this broad policy initiative indeed recognised the overarching necessity to make progress on youth employment and social inclusion. In this, the European Youth Pact is complementing the existing policy framework on youth, currently in force at the EU level through the Open Method of Coordination, and is thus contributing to achieve the principles for European youth policies that were laid down in 2001 in the White Paper "A new impetus for youth". The European Youth Forum is convinced that youth issues should be addressed in all policy initiatives relevant to young people.

In this paper, we will introduce the position of the European Youth Forum on the main question included in the Commission consultation regarding actions that could be taken at the EU level with a view to promoting the active inclusion of people furthest from the labour market. In addition, this reaction by the

¹ 0406-05 YFJ Bureau Position Paper on the Green Paper on Demographic Change, "Embracing the Future", September 2005

European Youth Forum aims to give insights on adequate actions to be implemented for young people more specifically.

I Relevant EU actions to promote the active inclusion of the people furthest from the labour market

The European Youth Forum reiterates the urgent need for the EU to engage in resolved actions so as to fulfill the Lisbon strategy's goal to make a decisive step in the eradication of poverty in the EU before 2010.

The European Union and its Member States need to increase their efforts and actions to fight against poverty and social exclusion. The European Youth Forum welcomes the European Council's recent decision to reaffirm the European Union's commitment to fight against poverty and social exclusion. Now that the Open Method of Coordination on Social Protection and Social Inclusion has been given the means to influence other policy processes, the tool exists to develop coherent and comprehensive policies to fight against poverty and social exclusion.

Before developing new policies, the European Union and its Member States need to understand that successful actions to fight against poverty cannot be achieved only through employment and "active inclusion" policies. Poverty is a complex social phenomenon, whose eradication can only happen through an ambitious agenda based on a continuous dialogue with the relevant civil society organisations leading to actions tailored to the peoples' needs. In addition, fighting against poverty requires long-term policies. A priority for the European Union should be to engage already today in the preparation for a successful 2010 European Year against social exclusion and poverty.

National minimum income schemes need to be more coordinated at the European Union level. The European Commission should play its role to stimulate and encourage Member States to agree on the development of more binding instruments in this regard at the EU level. A directive setting European guidelines on how to develop minimum income schemes would be an appropriate tool to bar the current trend towards negative competition between Member States as regards social policies, potentially leading to "social dumping".

Alongside the ongoing debate on the European Social Model, the fight of the European Union against poverty should be given higher visibility. This needs to be the case because poverty threatens social cohesion and therefore the European capacity to raise economic growth levels. But in addition, the growing levels of poverty and job insecurity are real concerns for the European population. European citizens need to be given real guarantees on the commitment of European policy makers to fight against poverty and social exclusion.

II Promoting youth employment and social inclusion: the corner stone of any European Union policies to promote the active inclusion of the people furthest from the labour market.

Young European citizens are the ones suffering the most from precarious working conditions, unemployment and social marginalisation. Any European Union action to reverse the degrading social situation of young people can only be effective if developed through an open dialogue between policy makers and youth organisations.

In addition, when considering the social challenges to youth, it is essential to distinguish European youth as a group from young people with fewer opportunities. Although this consultation focuses on disadvantaged groups, it is nonetheless extremely important to remember that all young people are facing challenges to become integrated in society and the employment market, whatever their social background.

Active inclusion policies as they are understood by European policy makers can only respond to the needs of youth as a group but in any event cannot match the needs of young people with fewer opportunities. Young people with fewer opportunities need tailored actions, which are far away from the current policies implemented through the EU “growth and jobs” strategy and the development of Active Labour Market Policies. The reality is that young people with fewer opportunities are in fact not in a situation to get included in the labour market. Disadvantaged young people first need to be helped to face their personal challenges because these personal issues have led them to believe that they are incapable of becoming included in mainstream society.

In addition, as their feeling of exclusion is, essentially, the combined result of the negative way in which young people with fewer opportunities are often considered within society, and of their personal discouraging experiences with the governmental bodies in charge of helping them, the first step of any successful policy aiming to include young people with fewer opportunities is to focus policies and services on the specific needs of these young people.

The European Youth Forum urges the EU and its Member States to develop actions tailored to the needs of young people with fewer opportunities. Then, notably, more research initiatives² are needed to assess the conditions of “inherited poverty” in Europe and to identify good practice examples of effective policies at the national level to combat poverty traps. The involvement of youth organisations in the process is crucial to the success of these initiatives.

Besides EU actions to answer the specific needs of young people with fewer opportunities, the European Union needs to consider other policies targeting all young people, who as a group, face important challenges to inclusion in the labour market. Alongside the commitment made through the European Youth

² Building upon the recent study on “youth disadvantage” contracted by DG EMPL and on the forthcoming study on the “status zero group” performed by DG EAC

Pact in 2005³, and in full collaboration with youth organisations, the OMCs on Employment and on Social Protection - social inclusion, and the EU action programme to combat discrimination, should be used to commonly define EU tools to be implemented in each national context so as to effectively tackle the needs of young people.

Another complementary point of departure for further work on youth employment and social inclusion could be the White Paper on youth adopted in 2001 and the decision included in it to promote “youth autonomy”. Youth autonomy may only be achieved if European Social Protection systems and in particular, minimum income schemes and unemployment benefits consider and respond to the needs of young people in Europe. The European Youth Forum therefore calls for an increased consideration of young peoples’ needs within national social protection systems.

Because the autonomy of youth depends on young peoples’ capacity to find a job, it should be a priority to provide youth with better information on employment opportunities through the development of efficient orientation mechanisms. In addition, formal education systems should be revisited to make sure that the acquired qualifications are more relevant to the needs of the European labour market, thus eliminating the mismatch between education and work. Furthermore, the European Youth Forum calls for the recognition of the real competencies acquired through Non Formal Education and volunteering⁴.

A concrete example of relevant action for the European Union to improve the conditions of youth employment and social inclusion is the development of a new policy on traineeships, offering minimum guarantees to all European trainees. Indeed, although the European Youth Forum acknowledges the value of traineeships as adequate tools to initiate young people to employment realities, the observed tendency to disguise jobs into unpaid traineeships and its consequences on young peoples’ living standards are unacceptable.

To be effective, these tools should be mainstreamed and coordinated between all relevant policy areas: education, housing, employment, social inclusion. This calls for the creation in each national government of a coordination structure, whose role would be to make sure that all relevant governmental and non governmental actors are involved in the development of policies responding to the needs of young people. At the European level, the European Youth Forum asks for the development of a genuine “structured dialogue” between the relevant European institutions and the European Youth Forum.

³ 0280-05 European Youth Forum Position Paper on the European Youth Pact, “For a Pact with impact”, April 2005

⁴ 0716-05 European Youth Forum Policy Paper on “Recognition of Non Formal Education: Confirming the real competencies of young people in the knowledge society”.

Conclusion:

The European Youth Forum considers the Commission consultation on the European Union action to promote the “active inclusion of the people furthest from the labour market” as a good basis for further work. The European Youth Forum strongly believes that the European Union has an important role to play in this area. Ambitious and binding policy initiatives such as the development of a directive on “active inclusion” need to be envisaged. Any action on this issue should encompass a significant youth dimension and youth organisations are key actors ready to participate in the policy processes to come.