



“Meeting young people’s needs”

A European Youth Forum  
approach  
to Youth Policy

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### **Introduction**

The last decade has witnessed considerable changes in the international youth policy environment. The enlarged European Union has developed a clear youth policy agenda through publication of the European Commission White Paper “*New impetus on European youth*”, the adoption of Council Resolutions establishing the Open Method of Coordination in the youth field and common objectives for youth policy development, as well as through the adoption of the European Youth Pact at the level of Heads of State and Government.

The Council of Europe, the champion of youth policy since the 1970s, is now shifting its focus to rights-based youth policy, strengthening the European approach to youth policy even further. On the global level, the United Nations has developed its own strong youth agenda through the enhanced and re-launched World Programme of Action for Youth, and many of the specialised UN agencies and the World Bank have started to focus more and more on youth issues.<sup>1</sup>

In view of the developments in the youth policy agenda, the cooperation which has grown with different institutional partners and the changes that European societies are facing, such as globalization and an ageing population, the European Youth Forum considers that this is the time to define its approach to youth policy while engaging in different political processes and advocating for the inclusion of youth interests in different sectoral policy areas.

This paper intends to provide the general context in which youth issues will be approached by the European Youth Forum and define the essential principles and expectations of youth organisations in Europe regarding youth policy - no matter the institution or the level of decision approached. This Policy Paper aims to promote the mainstreaming of youth issues in all policy areas affecting young peoples' lives, as a working culture for decision-makers, public administrations, the labour market and civil society.

### **The YFJ Approach to Youth Policy**

Youth Policy is a cross-sectoral and integrated policy aimed at young people, involving young people, which stems from the needs of young people. Its aim is to improve and develop the living, learning and working conditions and participation of young people, encompassing the whole range of social, cultural, economic, and environmental issues affecting them and other groups in society. Youth policy shall involve young people at the local, regional, national, European and global level. The European Youth Forum rejects an approach where young people are seen as a problem in society and youth policy a tool to solve this problem. While not denying that there are young people in society who are at risk and do therefore need targeted measures, the YFJ stresses that youth policy targets all young people, and moreover, the Forum does not recognise so called youth policy which only addresses young people at risk. All young people have the same rights regardless of their cultural, ethnic, geographical or economic background, and youth policy should in turn be developed to meet the needs of all of them.

Youth Policy is by definition a horizontal policy where coherent and co-ordinated efforts across different policy and administration sectors are ensured through integrated actions. At all levels, youth policy co-ordinates measures to serve the interests of youth and promote participation of young people to shape social,

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<sup>1</sup> See World Development Report 2007 “Development and the next generation” by the World Bank, released in September 2006

economic, cultural and environmental life. Young people must be at the heart of youth policy, not as clients, but as actors and contributors to this dynamic process.

One of the challenges of youth policy is the lack of common agreement on the age range covered by the term 'youth'. The general agreement is that youth is the period between childhood and adulthood. According to different institutions, indicators, and statistical data, childhood lasts until the age of 18, whereas from 15 onwards, some institutions or indicators feel that an individual is in their youth. The same uncertainty exists when defining the upper range of youth - again, depending on the approach, this can vary from 24 to 35 years-old.

While the European Youth Forum considers that youth policy should not be defined as serving only those within a certain age bracket, the YFJ is convinced that the debate on age limits highlights the need for a youth policy covering a broad age range - taking into account individual differences in the transition to adulthood and addressing the autonomy of young people.

Having said that, there is a need then to establish features, principles and policy areas which are relevant for young people and therefore which are of greater interest to them.

#### **Rights and responsibilities of young people**

Every young person is a citizen and therefore has rights and responsibilities. Citizenship is a key element in defining rights and responsibilities.

One of the main rights of a citizen is said to be the right to vote, which is often seen as the primary way to exercise citizenship. In most cases, the legal voting age is 18 years. While the European Youth Forum is convinced that voting ages should be lowered to 16, we emphasize the rights and responsibilities of the young people under legal age of exercising citizenship rights. Moreover, having no voting right, people under the legal age need the means and spaces to be heard and to participate in decision making - thus contributing to the development of global and European integration, as well as their own (national) societies.

For youth organisations, citizenship also implies responsibilities. Having a right to participate becomes meaningless without a sense of responsibility and solidarity. A democratic, sustainable and truly prosperous society requires that its citizens take the responsibility to care for the common good. Being responsible means that young people are aware and take into consideration the consequences of their actions: thinking for themselves and acting for others, which is the essence of active citizenship, allows young people to really be the masters of their own destiny.

Recognising the principle of participation as an essential principle underlying all youth policy means also recognising the structural injustice and imbalance in a society where power belongs to adults having voting rights and access to all structures, and whose representative organisations are well respected and are heard by institutions. The aim of youth policy has to be the removal of this injustice and the emergence of a society where young people have an equal opportunity with adults to shape the decisions affecting their lives.

#### **Solidarity between generations**

Youth policy is of importance not only for the young, but for all generations. There is a need to create pathways, dialogue and understanding between different groups

within society, so as to contribute to intergenerational solidarity. This solidarity does not, however, only concern present generations. This is particularly true concerning sustainable development, as young people today, as well as their children and grand-children, are the ones who will have to deal with the consequences of not taking sustainable development issues seriously at present. True solidarity between generations does therefore also imply that development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs is realised. European society is both an ageing one and one that is, globally, a main contributor to many unsustainable environmental and economic trends.

Consequently, the following policies are priorities and full components of youth policy:

- Demographic changes: the need for intergenerational dialogue and solidarity between present generations <sup>2</sup>, specifically ensuring the positive reconciliation of private and professional life through the provision, amongst other things, of free quality childcare.
- Sustainable development <sup>3</sup>: the need to take into account the social, political, cultural and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, to achieve solidarity with future generations
- Migration: the most significant phenomena changing societies and thus affecting young people's lives. There is a clear need to develop policies which address the different aspects implied by migration.

### **Cross-Sectoral Framework for Youth Policy**

The European Youth Forum identifies three main pillars as cornerstones of youth policy: participation, autonomy and the well being of young people, and personal development for a knowledge-based society. These constitute the framework of youth policy.

#### **Participation**

Any policy aimed at young people must be characterised by the fundamental principle of youth participation. Participation is about having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support, to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society. In particular, the YFJ believes that a 'culture of participation', where the voices and views of young people and youth organisations are valued and taken into account, needs to be created.

Youth participation is by definition both cross-sectoral as well as a sectoral policy. As a cross-sectoral policy, it should be seen as a fundamental principle which gives the opportunities and allows young people to be heard and included in the structures, processes and policies affecting them. As a policy area in itself, participation affects different policies regarding the different environments of young people, such as participation in a participative and representative democracy<sup>4</sup>, involvement in schools, and recognition of volunteering. The mains

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<sup>2</sup> See « *Embracing the future* » European Youth Forum Bureau position paper on the *Green Paper consultation on demographic changes* (0406-05)

<sup>3</sup> See European Youth Forum policy paper on Sustainable development (0182-06)

<sup>4</sup> The European Youth Forum advocates for the lowering of electoral age to the age of 16 (see Resolution on Lowering the electoral age by the Council of Members adopted in April 2006, document 0346-06 lobby)

aims are to give young people the keys to be active citizens, to be heard and to be recognized as a full and equal group in society.

Nevertheless, ensuring representation, transparency and democracy, with regards to the opportunities and spaces for the participation of young people, is a core issue. While the European Youth Forum acknowledges the changes in participation trends and the fact that not all young people are members of youth organisations, it is firmly convinced that non-governmental - and especially youth - organisations provide a solid and democratic representation of the interests of young people through their wide-ranging networks and democratic decision-making procedures;<sup>5</sup> and that thereby, young people should be given the necessary spaces at all levels to voice their concerns and be part of the decision-making process. Youth non-governmental organisations also promote participation by young people from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds and equal participation by both young men and young women.

Moreover, in view of the major issues facing contemporary societies, e.g. multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity, as well as the powerful trends promoting consumerism and individualism, civil society - and youth NGOs as an integral part of civil society - should be recognised, supported and adequately resourced to address these challenges and to be able to contribute to the future development of society.

Therefore the following sectoral policies should be seen as priorities and full components of youth policy:

- Good governance (schools, administrations, authorities, including co-management system)
- Active citizenship
- Volunteering
- Information
- Facilitated and equal access to rights and law
- Guaranteed and supported associative life
- Support and capacity building of civil society and youth NGOs

### **Autonomy and well-being of young people**

Youth organisations want to make sure that every young person is integrated into society and is fully equipped to contribute as a citizen. Autonomy signifies young people having the necessary support, resources and opportunities to choose to live independently; to run their own lives; enjoying the possibility of full social and political participation in all sectors of everyday life; and being able to take independent decisions.<sup>6</sup> Therefore the following sectoral policies should be seen as priorities and full components of youth policy:

- Equality and non-discrimination
- Employment: fighting precariousness in the labour market and ensuring the availability of adequate, suitable employment
- Social protection and poverty eradication

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<sup>5</sup> The European Youth Forum defines representative youth organisations as organisations respecting the following four criteria: inclusiveness, openness, independence, and internal democratic structures

<sup>6</sup> This definition comes from the YFJ policy paper on youth autonomy (0052-04) adopted in April 2004. This is seen as the most comprehensive working definition.

- Quality and efficient public services with equal access at the point of delivery
- Housing
- Transport
- Urban and rural environments
- Health: strategies for promoting the good health of young people and sexual and reproductive health, including lifestyle issues
- Youth justice
- Sport, leisure

### **Personal development for a knowledge based society**

Education is a broad and critical term, which does not simply cover the definition used by most governments, i.e. referring only to schools or universities. Indeed, youth organisations understand education not only as the acquisition of professional skills in order to be able to become employed, but also as a necessity to provide everyone with the means and opportunities for integration into society as a member of the active work force and also as a citizen. Education should feature in all environments and spheres of life, and during childhood, youth and adulthood. Youth organisations stress the need to recognise the skills acquired through non-formal education which greatly contribute to the development of the individual as a citizen, and therefore, to the development of society.

Thus, the following sectoral policies should be seen as priorities and full components of youth policy:

- Quality education tailored to the needs of young people in terms of personal development but also in terms of the demands of the labour market
- An education system offering multiple entry points
- Entrepreneurial education
- Links in order to develop the synergies of closer cooperation between the formal and non formal education systems
- Policies providing support for youth work, youth training, and to providers of non-formal and informal education
- Recognition of non-formal education and of exchange periods
- Intercultural learning and global education
- Access to culture

### **Implementation**

Youth policy, as identified and agreed above, is complete and covers a comprehensively broad range of policy areas. Some of these areas specifically target youth, while others, such as those regarding demographic change, sustainable development or volunteering, concern society as a whole. Therefore, for a coherent and constructive Youth Policy, authorities need to work on youth issues in an integrated way - *integrated youth policy*.

All policies affecting youth need to be dealt with from the local to the national level, and, whatever the national administrative system, there should be a national youth policy providing a framework allowing the relevant authorities to act and set up the necessary measures and policies. This would ensure both a coherent design and implementation of integrated youth policy. Similarly, it is essential to consider national youth policy in a larger framework, such as regional and international.

Considering that decisions affecting young peoples' lives are taken on all levels of governance ranging from the local to the global, youth organisations are convinced that a truly constructive youth policy can be designed and, therefore, implemented with a multi-level approach encompassing all institutions and levels of decision making.

The integration of young people and youth organisations in the development of youth policy is a prerequisite for efficient policy delivery. Nevertheless this can be achieved if a proper budget is allocated for both policies targeting youth specifically or where youth is integrated as a target group. The concept of "youth budgeting"<sup>7</sup> should be explored by the relevant authorities, independently of the territorial level of decision making.

To ensure that the needs and concerns of young people are genuinely addressed, it is vital that young people participate fully in the design and delivery of policies and actions. This should take place at the national level when designing a national framework but also at the local, regional, European and global levels. The participation of young people and youth organisations in the development of youth policy is not only an aspect of good governance, but also necessary to ensure that their views and concerns are properly identified and understood - and that youth policy meets the needs of young people.

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<sup>7</sup> Youth budgeting: A specific evaluation of the impact of budgeting to young people in policy areas affecting young people should be carried out as a part of the budgeting process.