



Contribution of the Bureau of the
European Youth Forum
to the BEPA consultation paper on
Europe's social reality

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1. Foreword

The main aim of this contribution is to present the views of the European Youth Forum on the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA) consultation paper on “Europe’s social reality”. But in addition, whereas the European Union’s social policy agenda is going to be reviewed in 2008, this contribution also aims to assess to what extent the European Union’s agenda on social policies¹ adequately responds to the identified challenges currently facing European societies.

While it looks into the wide scope of issues covered in the BEPA consultation paper and in the social agenda of the European Union, this contribution mainly focuses on underlining the situation of youth within changing European societies and aims to raise the concerns of youth organisations and young people regarding the evolving nature of Europe’s social reality.

2. Executive Summary

In the long run, through becoming a post-industrial knowledge and service economy, Europe experienced social progress such as longer life expectancy and it offered higher levels of prosperity to a significant share of its population. Nevertheless, the aim to achieve equal opportunities for all is far from the current practice, which sees many Europeans living in poverty and facing challenges to accede to decent education and employment. In addition, globalization risks to aggravate social inequalities if social protection systems are not reformed to adequately cover the risks present in society and help people getting out of the vicious circle of exclusion.

In the current demographic context, young people are becoming a numerical minority in Europe, which will affect their capacity to promote positive social change if no action is taken to ensure the representation of young people in the democratic life. Already today young people are in a situation of permanent social vulnerability, notably because social protection systems are not equipped to respond to their needs. Social protection systems therefore urgently need to better respond to the needs of young people, whose claim for autonomy is in the interest of all the groups present in society. The social agenda of the European Union, which will be reviewed next year, should explicitly acknowledge, foresee concrete measures, and allocate adequate resources to the European Youth Pact implementation as this high level policy instrument would otherwise fail in its mission to build young Europeans’ trust in their future.

3. Introduction

Independently established by youth organisations, the European Youth Forum is made up of more than 90 National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations, which are federations of youth

¹ COM(2005) 33 final

organisations in themselves. It brings together tens of millions of young people from all over Europe, organised in order to represent their common interests.

The European Youth Forum welcomes the BEPA consultation paper on Europe's social reality as a very deep and thorough analysis of the recent trends observed within European societies as well as of the main problems affecting them. Whereas the European Union is about to review the Lisbon Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs and the Social Agenda, this consultation is also a timely occasion to engage in a broader debate on the main trends and social challenges present in European societies. Through its contribution, the European Youth Forum wishes to put forward its views on the implications of these social trends for young people, and it aims to propose concrete ways to deal with the problems facing young people in society, notably through the EU's social agenda.

Starting with a general assessment of the BEPA consultation paper (I), the European Youth Forum contribution will then focus on assessing the impact that Europe's changing social reality has had and will have on young people. As a natural consequence of Europe's demographic change, the decisions taken at the level of society are becoming less reflective of young people's views and expectations (II). The social situation of youth is worsening rapidly as part of a consumer-based post-industrial knowledge and service economy (III). And European Welfare States are at the moment not well equipped to respond to the needs of young people (IV). Although the European Youth Pact was included as a priority domain of action in the EU social agenda 2006-2010, the results yet obtained are far below young peoples' expectations (V).

4. General assessment - Europe is facing a democratic crisis rooted in the growing inequality of opportunities in life

Over the last decades in Europe, one of the most striking social evolutions has been the trend to individualization. The BEPA argues that individualization, together with the emergence of mass affluence and the "consumerisation" of citizenship posed a big challenge to democratic engagement. Nevertheless, the BEPA rightly acknowledges that the observed trend to individualization does not mean that Europeans are no longer concerned about social cohesion. And it is also accurate to distinguish between the general decline of secular institutions such as political parties, trade unions or religious institutions requiring to "gather" on a regular basis, and the growing engagement of Europeans in voluntary activities. The BEPA is however wrong when identifying a "paradox" in the fact that "voluntary activity is apparently complementary to a well-developed welfare State, not a substitute for it". Voluntary engagement indeed heavily relies on peoples' capacity to lead a decent and autonomous life and this is therefore a logic consequence and never a paradox that richer countries usually afford greater levels of voluntary engagement.

In the last decades, representative democracies have been in crisis because European policy-makers made decisions far from Europeans' realities, whose main aims have been to back the development of a post-industrial knowledge and service economy and to optimize Europe's capacities to be and remain competitive in the context of globalization. European policy-makers wanted to sustain and develop "mass affluence" and well-being in Europe, which they only partially achieved.

Whereas this is true indeed that a majority of Europeans are living decently and that life satisfaction is relatively high in Europe, the growing inequalities between the "cosmopolitans", who are the winners of current economic, social and cultural trends and those left behind by economic change and industrial restructuring is an evidence of Europe's failure to offer equal opportunities to all its people. Social protection systems in most cases did not well adapt to economic and social change and therefore did not manage to counterbalance the negative effects of globalization. And although education is key to achieve equal opportunities for all, most of EU governments did not invest enough resources to ensure that all young people have an equal access and are given the same opportunities to succeed at school. The European Youth Forum therefore regrets that some schools became the "repository for many society's ills". Schools should on the contrary be the place enabling social progress for all children and youth. And as a matter of principle the Youth Forum rejects the BEPA's use of wording such as "dysfunctional children" as such expressions dangerously conduce to the objectification of children.

In addition, despite significant progress towards gender equality in Europe, the BEPA report rightly acknowledges the persisting gender pay gaps of around 15% as well as the lower employment rates for women in Europe. At this stage, gender equality will only be achieved if policy-makers are ready to show the example through achieving gender parity in democratically elected bodies. The presence of women in political and economic decision-making is indeed the best way to ensure that Europe indeed manages to overcome its "gender deficit" rooted in History and culture. In today's Europe, it is indeed unacceptable that young women perform better at school but work in a limited scope of professions, face multiple forms of discrimination, are the first victims of violence and harassment, and remain the ones mainly in charge for caring for the families. As observed in the report, the "dual earner household is now the norm"; this should lead to the adaptation of gender respective roles and opportunities.

Lastly, the European Youth Forum believes that the decline of representative institutions is rooted in their failure to really consider the views and aspirations of the citizens. Through enabling Europeans to realize their willingness to participate and be heard in collective decision-making, the voluntary sector, including youth organisations, have filled in this democratic vacuum.

5. Young people and collective decision-making: How to fill the gap?

The European Youth Forum was not surprised to find in the BEPA consultation paper that “there are particular concerns about the level of voter participation among young people and lower socio-economic groups”. This is because the demographic evolution of Europe is progressively putting young people at a permanent disadvantage in society and lower socio-economic groups are the ones bearing the negative effects of globalization.

As reported in the BEPA consultation paper, in the 1950s and 60s, the emergence of a mass youth culture has led to the “trend to individualization” in Europe. Through “changing attitudes to authority, the family and what ordinary people seek out of life”, young people then provoked a significant raise in “expectations of personal self-fulfillment” and “life was no longer something to be accepted and lived as part of the collectivity in which one happened to be born”. As actors of change, young people therefore had a major role in shaping today’s societies, which are notably characterized by an enlarged personal freedom, the emancipation of women, birth control and the constant search for happiness and self-fulfillment.

In the 1950s however, such value shift could only take place because young people were then representing 40% of a European population, which was then subject to an unprecedented “baby boom”. As the BEPA paper highlights, “by 2000, the figure had fallen to 30% and by 2025, it is expected to be less than a quarter. By contrast, in 1950, less than 1 in 10 of the population were over 65. In 2000, the figure was around 1 in 6. By 2025 it will be well on the way to 1 in 4”. This rapidly changing composition of European populations is having a very strong impact on the position of youth in society. Young people are indeed facing increasing difficulties to find themselves well in a society where older generations, who are traditionally more conservative and reluctant to change, become a majority. Sometimes victims of stigmatization from other age groups, young people may also be tempted to reject democracy and its representatives, in which they don’t feel represented. And this in turn builds up the negative image that young people too often have in Europe where they are easily portrayed as dangerous and violent members of society. The European Youth Forum is concerned with the growing criminalisation of young people and the recent introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), for instance in Ireland and in the UK.

Conscious of these potential threats, the European Youth Forum is investing many efforts and resources to build a responsible youth movement in Europe, who is taking part in the democratic life and contributes to better policy-making responding to the needs and aspirations of young people. As one of its core missions, and through our activities and policy work the European Youth Forum is promoting young people’s active citizenship. One of our main goals is to reach out to all young people, whatever their social status, and to encourage the voluntary activities of young people. Volunteering is in this regard fundamental as it can help young people overcoming the challenges of a globalised world while participating in building a society, which relies on human capital and at the same time

promotes social capital. In addition, the economic value that volunteering brings to European societies should never be neglected but on the contrary measured to allow better policy-making in this field.

In order to restore young peoples' trust in representative democracy, the European Youth Forum is calling for the quick adoption and implementation of a series of measures, which can help young people remaining actors of positive social change in Europe. On the one hand, the Youth Forum urges policy-makers to lower the voting age to 16 as only such measure can ensure a broader representation of young people in collective decisions affecting them. Additionally, whereas young people between 16 and 18 often have responsibilities as workers, tax payers or parents, lowering the electoral age to 16 is needed to restore their balance between rights and responsibilities, which at the moment is missing. On the other hand, the European Youth Forum believes that more young people should be elected in representative positions from the local to the European levels. For this reason, the European Youth Forum would encourage the development of mechanisms enabling a minimum representation of young people in elected positions.

6. Improving the social situation of youth in society is an urgent concern

The BEPA consultation paper made its own Gösta Esping Andersen's analysis according to which young people are bearing the brunt of the rise of inequality in Europe, "facing an erosion of relative wages at all skills levels, while being hugely over-represented among the unemployed and those with precarious, short-term employment contracts". In line with this analysis, the European Youth Forum is observing these dramatic trends already for several years and it therefore decided to pay more attention and invest more resources to the improvement of young peoples' prospects in employment and in society within its strategic priorities for 2007-2012.

The BEPA paper also acknowledges the growing length of children's dependence on their parents, which "varies according to national university systems and employment prospects, where sometimes studies can extend into the early thirties". And it recognizes that there is "significant poverty among single under-30 year olds living alone: 37% in the UK, 42% in Germany, and 49% in the Netherlands". But interestingly, the authors are very close to accept young people's poverty as a socially acceptable problem, as it is generally supposed to be a short-term experience and because "some of the poverty among single young people may well be found among students and ex-students, who have left the parental home, most of whom will eventually find their way in the world". It is a big mistake to accept youth poverty because it is supposed to be a short-term experience, or because young people can count on their families to support them. But in addition to youth poverty itself, the fact that 20% of EU citizens with children are at risk of falling into poverty clearly shows all the obstacles that young people are facing to live an autonomous life, to settle with a partner and to have children. This also shows how far young people are

today from autonomy, which according to the Youth Forum is “the situation where young people have the necessary support, resources and opportunities to choose to live independently, to run their own lives and to have full social and political participation in all sectors of everyday life, and be able to take independent decisions”².

The current reality is that youth transitions from education to work are more and more complex and often last for around 10 years. Additionally, in today’s Europe, 15% of young people are leaving school early and therefore will always be subject to poverty even when in employment because the post-industrial knowledge and service economy in which we live does not offer any second chance to people who have left school early.

Preventing early school leaving and promoting higher educational attainment should therefore be at the core of the EU policies and investments in the field of education. To that end, the Youth Forum strongly encourages the EU and its Member States to look more in depth into the reasons why young people are leaving school early, which include a lack of information and orientation on higher education; a lack of financial capacity and the reluctance to take long-term student loans when the relevance of higher education in the labour market is not assured and whereas many young people feel a cultural gap between the world of education and their own background; isolation and the additional costs of studying abroad or outside the family hometown; inadequate teachers’ trainings.

To prevent early school leaving, the focus of educational policies should be on the learner and on the recognition of his or her real competences including those acquired through non-formal education and professional experience. Learning in all forms should be made accessible and not prohibitively expensive and in a Life Long Learning perspective, it is therefore essential to develop multiple entrance and exit educational paths and to ensure the recognition of all forms of learning achievements. For instance, the development of modules and credit systems could help school drop-outs in re-entering formal education after a study break. And the development of a European and of national Qualification Frameworks is a decisive step forward to facilitate pathways between different educational schemes and pillars - higher education, vocational education and non-formal education - should all qualification frameworks always guarantee transparency and quality assurance.

The European Youth Forum is worried about the current shape of the Lisbon objectives in the field of education and training as they are putting too much emphasis on monitoring drop out rates and too little on finding way to actively support students in their educational careers. Whereas the Member States are now developing their national reports, which will then be analysed by the Commission and the Council in view of the 2008 Joint Interim Report on Progress under the “Education and Training Work

² See the YFJ Policy Paper on Youth Autonomy (0052-04) adopted by the COMEM on 23-24 April 2004

Programme” 2010, the European Youth Forum pleads for all educational institutions to regularly monitor their access policies and find further ways to improve them in order to broaden the participation and diversify the student body.

In addition, young people entering the labour market are often experiencing a wide variety of atypical forms of low-paid employment before finding a good job.

Improving the situation of interns in Europe is a matter of urgency. The Youth Forum acknowledges that when they are part of education curricula, internships are a positive tool to facilitate young people’s access to employment. But the learning dimension of internships has been reducing rapidly whereas employers are more and more recruiting graduates as interns without offering them any labour law protection and often without any or very limited financial compensation. Therefore, the YFJ fully supports and encourages the Commission in its will to develop a European Charter for Internships.

Young people should be in a position to consider a career where they become self employed or where they engage in entrepreneurship and get the necessary support if they wish to do so. This needs to be encouraged by simplifying procedures, by providing financial supports to young entrepreneurs and ensuring that there are public services and facilities in place to provide training and/or advice and support in starting a business. Developing a business or enterprise involves risks that can eventually lead to business failure and unemployment. Every person, employed or self employed, should have the right to a professional second chance and the development of comprehensive life long learning schemes is critical to that end.

Besides access to good education and decent employment, being and remaining in good health is another key condition of well-being. While important to everyone, certain health issues are often of particular importance to certain segments of society, such as young people and the elderly. For example, young people are likely to be more susceptible to certain health threats, but, if supported and given the right information and assistance they can address potential health problems early in life. On this regard, youth organisations have a crucial role to play for instance in promoting healthy lifestyles and in preventing substance abuse. A healthy population is of importance if the EU is to meet several of the other challenges that lay ahead. Many health policies take account of young people. However, young people and youth organisations are seldom themselves involved in setting the agenda. Involving youth organisations in health policy would not only result in more effective policies. It could also create the additional leverage and momentum to health policies in the Member States that would be needed to move forward the agenda.

Because many tend to believe that young people should be supported by their families, EU social protection systems are not ready to offer support to

those young people who are experiencing complex transitions between education and work. Although a big diversity of situations exist in Europe, the BEPA paper interestingly assumed that the provision of social benefits has largely become universal in Europe before citing as an exception the Italian case where single unemployed young people are not entitled to social provision. The European Youth Forum believes that the growing vulnerability of youth in society is an emerging social risk, which is not tackled by European social protection systems, mainly for cultural reasons. In order to restore fairness and equality between the generations, it is extremely important to reform social protection systems and allocate more resources to improve the social situation of young people within society.

7. Restoring fairness and equality between the generations: How to reform social protection systems?

In his article “Families, Government and the distribution of skills”, Gösta Esping Andersen argues that “post-war society was perhaps youthful but social policy focused inordinately on the elderly. In our increasingly aged society, our priorities should arguably favour children”.

Before 1945, Europe’s families were used to care and support for the elderly in the same way as parents are assuming the costs of living for their children in contemporary Europe. But the social risks associated with ageing were progressively considered as a collective responsibility requiring the establishment of social insurance mechanisms. In 1945, social protection systems were therefore built, notably to respond to the important social risks facing the elderly at that time.

In today’s Europe, even though poverty still affects 1 in 6 older people, especially older women, the BEPA paper concludes that “the ageing society means for many at present a long and comfortable retirement”. In order to ensure financial sustainability, a majority of Member States have opted for a process of incremental reforms to “pay as you go” pension systems that involve raising retirement ages, constraining benefits and increasing contributions. And the BEPA paper goes on acknowledging that “in order to win political support for such reforms, those already in retirement, or near it, have been largely unaffected. Fairness and equity have been compromised for reasons of understandable political expediency”. The European Youth is very much attached to fairness and equity between the generations and consequently believes that adequate incomes should be offered to retirees after a full working life. In addition, contesting the alleged “conflict between the generations”, the European Youth Forum is engaged into resolved actions to promote inter-generational dialogue and solidarity, in full cooperation with older peoples’ representative bodies.

In order to achieve inter-generational solidarity, the European Youth Forum strongly believes that social protection systems need to be reformed to better respond to the needs of all young people. Solidarity with young people should indeed not be limited to intra-family transfers as it is often the case today. It is instead highly needed that young people who need it

receive adequate support from society, enabling them to build stable and autonomous lives in the long run. In today's Europe, it should no longer be the case that young people remain dependent on their parents until their early thirties as at that stage of life young people should be considered by society as independent citizens more than as the children of their parents.

8. The social agenda: A decisive instrument of positive change for young people

Being the European Union's strategic roadmap for European social policies, the social agenda is a crucial policy document to foresee actions to be implemented by the European Union institutions and the Member States in response to the social challenges identified in the BEPA paper on Europe's social reality.

In its current form, the social agenda already includes a "commitment for youth, especially with a view to creating a dynamic relationship between the generations". Since then, this commitment for youth has been translated into reality through the European Youth Pact, a cross-sector policy initiative, which was inscribed in the Lisbon strategy, and aims to achieve the better integration of young people in employment and in society; to adapt education to the needs of a knowledge-based economy; and to better respond to the vulnerable situation of youth in the current demographic context, notably through the development of reconciliation policies encouraging greater youth autonomy as well as enabling young people to work and build their private lives more easily. Through the European Youth Pact, young people became a priority policy concern at the highest level of EU policy making. The EU Heads of States recognised for the first time the strategic importance and great need to intensify efforts to improve the social situation of youth in society.

Since 2005, the European Youth Forum has closely monitored the actions taken by the European Union and its Member States to implement the Pact. But our mid-term assessment of the Pact clearly shows that it has hitherto failed in two of its main objectives. The European Youth Pact was indeed never truly conceived as a participatory process in which young people and youth organisations are involved from the development of policies through to their monitoring; and the development of new working methods, in view of the cross-sector nature of the policies encompassed in the Youth Pact, and which involve all policy areas on an equal footing in the policy development process, has hardly yet occurred.

At the European level, following the repeated calls from the EU Council on youth, notably in its resolution on "creating equal opportunities for all young people - full participation in society", adopted in May 2007, it is extremely important to mobilise all relevant EU programmes and funds, in particular the European Social Fund, available at EU level to improve the implementation and outcomes of the European Youth Pact. Regular forums gathering all relevant stakeholders should be organised by the Commission to assess the outcomes of implementation and highlight national good

practices. Monitoring tools and reporting mechanisms such as the organisation of regular discussions on the Youth Pact implementation in the framework of the structured dialogue with young people should also be designed.

At the national level, better coordination between the various Ministries involved is needed. To that end, because Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon who were appointed by each government as the main responsible persons for the implementation of the Lisbon strategy do not have the capacity to focus on the European Youth Pact implementation, the nomination of Mr. and Mrs. Youth Pact within each government should be required. In addition, for better follow up on implementation, the Lisbon National Reform Programmes, the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion and Social Protection and the Joint Interim reports of Progress under the Education & Training 2010 Work Programme should all include a separate section on the state of implementation of the European Youth Pact. Lastly, the EU Member States should also encourage and support regions in developing regional strategies to implement the European Youth Pact and match these strategies with the use of funds available through the European Social Fund.

In the Commission's Lisbon progress report for 2006, the Commission made individual recommendations to a majority of EU Member States who did not fulfil their commitment to offer a "new start" to all young people being unemployed within six months. The 2008 review of the Social Agenda must make decisive steps towards better implementation of the European Youth Pact.

9. Conclusion

In April 2007, the BEPA published a report entitled "investing in youth: an empowerment strategy". This report called for a European strategy based on early intervention as investing in young people is in the long run paying off through cutting costs of compensatory measures. In 2008, whereas the European Union is going to review at the same time the Lisbon Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs and the Social Agenda, it is a unique occasion to put into practice the recommendations included in this BEPA report.

But already now the European Youth Forum would like to recall the Commission that any strategy for young people cannot succeed without the engagement of young people themselves. An investment strategy in and with young people is what young people need to overcome the numerous social challenges that they are facing in contemporary Europe.