



European Youth Forum Policy Paper

Guiding Principles on Common Objectives for
Voluntary activities and Greater
understanding of young people

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Introduction

The Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC), proposed by the European Commission White Paper: *A New Impetus for European Youth*¹ and confirmed by the Council Resolution on European Co-operation in the Field of Youth², started with the priority areas of youth participation and youth information in July 2002. Common objectives for these two areas are currently being redrafted by the Council with a view to adoption at the end of November, after which the implementation phase in the Member States will take place. In parallel, the OMC initiated the work on the priority areas of voluntary activities and greater understanding of young people in July 2003.

The same procedure that was used for participation and information has been used for voluntary activities and greater understanding of young people with questionnaires on the areas distributed to the Member States and candidate countries, who consult young people and youth organisations "as they deem appropriate" on the questions asked. On the basis of the answers to the questionnaires, the Commission will prepare a synthesis report for both areas, identifying examples of best practice and innovative approaches which are of common interest to the Member States. Then, after consultation with the European Youth Forum, the Commission will present drafts to the Council for the development of the common objectives.

The European Youth Forum believes it of the utmost importance that *it is* involved in the whole process of the Open Method of Co-ordination at the European level. We therefore welcomed the European Commission's positive response to our demand to be included at an earlier stage in the Open Method of Co-ordination on the formulation and drafting of the next questionnaires³. This resulted in a consultation by the Commission on the questionnaires on voluntary activities and greater understanding on young people⁴ and we would like to reiterate the demand from the consultation to draft the questions in a more youth-friendly language. The European Youth Forum would like to stress that young people can only participate fully in the consultation process if the questions asked are understandable and if they know which information is asked for.

¹ European Commission White Paper: *A New Impetus for European Youth*. http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/wpr/2001/com2001_0681en01.pdf

² Council Resolution on European Co-operation in the Field of Youth, OJ C 168/2 of 13 July 2002 or http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/pri/en/oj/dat/2002/c_168/c_16820020713en00020005.pdf

³ 0809-02 European Youth Forum Policy paper on guiding principles for youth participation and youth information, November 2002.

⁴ 0396-03 Report Commission consultation on questionnaires for voluntary activities and youth research, May 2003.

The European Youth Forum also repeats its demand for the framework of the national consultations with young people and their organisations to be strengthened and more clearly defined⁵. On the questionnaires for participation and information, the procedure and quality of the national consultations differed greatly and the time frame was in general very short⁶. We would therefore like the Commission to present guidelines for the Member States in the cover letter to the questionnaires on how to conduct a transparent and meaningful consultation of young people and youth organisations.

Furthermore, the European Youth Forum again underlines the importance of the national authorities and the European Commission making the answers to the questionnaires public to national youth structures all over Europe. In the White Paper consultation, one of the conclusions was that young people wanted a European youth policy to be built on openness and transparency. In order to know what influence the consultations have had in practice, getting access to the final answers to the questionnaires is crucial. The European Youth Forum also believes that the European Parliament and the national parliaments should be more involved in the Open Method of Co-ordination.

Finally, the European Youth Forum calls upon the Council to adopt concrete and ambitious common objectives in order to fully assess the development of youth policy in Europe. In this context, the European Youth Forum has elaborated its policies on voluntary activities and greater understanding of young people by presenting guiding principles for these areas.

Common objectives on voluntary activities and greater understanding of young people

1. Voluntary activities

Voluntary activities can be defined as the commitment of time and energy to actions for the benefit of society, local communities, individuals and a range of causes outside of the immediate family. Voluntary activities are undertaken of a person's own free will and without payment, except for the occasional reimbursement of expenses. One crucial part of youth participation is the voluntary commitment of young people. Volunteering is a key element for most youth organisations and it contributes to strengthening the development of civil society. Young people are involved in all of the elements of daily youth work, which empowers them as key actors. A principal means of promoting youth participation and the development of civil society is therefore by engaging young people in voluntary activities.

Volunteering offers an opportunity for young people to develop social values, establish stronger individual identities, and gain experience and skills not normally

⁵ 0304-03 European Youth Forum Position paper on Implementing Common Objectives to enhance the participation of young people and improve information for young people, April 2003.

⁶ 0108-03 Synthesis report on the NYCs involvement in the national consultations on the OMC, January 2003.

provided within the formal education or professional training sector. Volunteering is open to all regardless of their academic or socio-economic background and, as such, can play an important role in social inclusion. Furthermore, it promotes the mobility of young people, which makes a vital contribution to intercultural understanding. International volunteering must also be considered as an important tool for promoting intercultural understanding and peace.

In an era of growing individualism and consumerism, young people are under constant pressure to perform and succeed in formal education, in employment and in society in general. Therefore, the prevailing societal trends put pressure on young people to focus primarily on their own needs, thus undermining community life and social cohesion. Since voluntary activities encourage young people not only to work with others in their community, but also allows them to experience the value of working for others and for the community as a whole, it counteracts this trend and helps build social capital.

Voluntary activities must not be confused with government schemes or projects linked to the education system or to employment measures that comprise some element of unpaid work in the community. Any government programme or project that obliges a citizen to undertake work in an unpaid capacity cannot be considered as voluntary work since it is not entered into freely by the citizen. The European Youth Forum believes that young people should not be forced to engage in unpaid work unless they decide to do so themselves as volunteers. While some of these programmes or projects may be beneficial for the participant and the community, any attempt to define such activities as voluntary is unhelpful and inappropriate in our view.

While supporting voluntary activities and volunteering there are certain realms of activity and areas of work where it is not appropriate. Volunteers should never be used to replace professional staff or as a cheap source of labour. The European Youth Forum strongly rejects any attempt by the European Union or Member States to substitute current or potential paid employment with voluntary work. For the same reasons, the European Youth Forum does not accept the use of the label 'volunteering' for activities under programmes that grant the participants a regular salary.

Guiding principles for common objectives:

STRONGER LEGAL BASIS FOR YOUNG VOLUNTEERS

Member States should:

- Ensure that all young people have the opportunity to volunteer in their local communities or in another region or country in civil society organisations or other non-profit projects;
- Increase the financial and administrative support for civil society organisations that are engaging and supporting young volunteers, with specific budget lines for the promotion and support of young volunteers and voluntary activity.
Member States should report on these efforts on a yearly basis;

- Ensure legal and social protection of volunteers at the national and European level. A framework for the legal protection of volunteers should be established and/or strengthened at the national level, facilitating their work rather than restricting it. **A European charter of rights for volunteers should be established.**
- Encourage the participation and ensure the freedom of mobility to those volunteers resident in non-member countries and willing to volunteer in the EU. Special attention should also be given to young people who have problems gaining access to voluntary activities;
- Identify at the national level the obstacles that prevent young people from volunteering. **The Council should invite the Commission to draw up a report that identifies how national legislation can promote transnational volunteering and tackle the obstacles to it.**

MORE PROMOTION OF VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Member States should:

- Promote volunteering as a means of non-formal learning and active participation in civil society among young people, through co-ordinated efforts at international, national, regional and local levels. This can be done by supporting existing and new youth organisations and NGOs;
- Develop a national policy for the support and promotion of volunteering among young people;
- Encourage all organisations and associations working with and including young volunteers in their work to review and - where necessary - to develop and enhance the quality of the volunteering experience which they offer to young people;
- Develop and implement, in partnership with youth organisations and the Commission, a campaign to promote volunteering among young people in Europe;
- Promote all aspects of mobility between European Union Member States and other countries in Europe, addressing the barriers to participation for some groups of young people in the European Voluntary Service programme;
- Promote national voluntary service programmes or activities performed abroad within Europe;
- Promote a stronger focus in the European Union on disseminating information about existing opportunities for volunteering. This information should be easily accessible and actively disseminated;
- Encourage the development of initiatives at the local level, because the main part of voluntary work is conducted on this level, which is often the starting point to voluntary commitment at other levels;
- Identify those groups of young people who are under-represented in voluntary activities and support and encourage them to become volunteers.

GREATER RECOGNITION OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES

Member States should:

- Promote the recognition of voluntary activities and their social value. **The Council should invite the Commission to draw up a report on the various forms and possibilities for recognising learning in the context of volunteering and voluntary service**⁷;
- Designate a "national volunteer week" together with the Commission in order to promote and highlight voluntary activities across Europe, with special emphasis on young people;
- In co-operation with employers, trade unions and the formal education structures at European Union and national level, develop a strategy to promote greater recognition of voluntary activities in formal education and in employment.

2. Greater understanding of young people

Young people today live in a very fast-changing world and there is often a lack of quantitative and qualitative information on them and their situation. Promoting a greater understanding of young people depends upon reliable knowledge, for which data is required and needs to be analysed. This requires quality youth research. Youth research should cover all the areas of relevance for young people and reflect everyday life and young people's realities and diversities.

Any attempt to develop and implement youth policies that will improve the quality of life of young people and will be for the benefit of society as a whole must be underpinned by a comprehensive and real understanding of young people and their life situations. In a number of areas, youth policy is developed on an ad-hoc basis, by a few experts or in response to the latest crisis or moral panic. Such approaches tend to result in a distortion of reality. Therefore the European Union and all its Member States must move towards a knowledge-based youth policy approach. Youth policies should be devised and revised not only on the basis of sound academic research, but with the participation and consultation of young people and youth organisations.

Guiding principles for common objectives:

GREATER COMMUNICATION AND CO-ORDINATION BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT ACTORS

Member States should:

- Promote communication and dialogue between the different actors in the research field, i.e youth organisations, youth researchers and policy-makers;

⁷ The European Youth Forum policy paper 'Youth organisations as non-formal educators - recognising our role' (0618-03) outlines the European Youth Forum position for recognising voluntary activities.

- Promote co-ordination of existing youth research within and between Member States. **Member States should establish or designate national youth research institutes or networks and a European network of these should be promoted in which young people and youth organisations are represented and involved at both the national and European level;**
- Promote and support the European youth research database within the Council of Europe - European Union partnership on youth research;
- Ensure that statistics include comparative indicators for young people. **The resulting figures should be presented in an annual national youth report that is submitted to the European Council.** The report should also include a more qualitative assessment of the social situation of young people.
- Use the collected data and its analysis in designing future projects and programmes.

BETTER INVOLVEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH WORKERS AND THEIR ORGANISATIONS IN YOUTH RESEARCH

Member States should:

Consult young people themselves in order to gain a better understanding of their perspective. Information not only on the experiences but also on the opinions of young people should feed into the development of definitions of quality in areas such as education and training and the establishment of benchmarking;

- Consult youth workers and recognise the knowledge and experience they have from their work with young people;
- Involve youth organisations in defining the themes for research to be conducted and in the assessment of the research results;
- Ensure that in assessing the social situation of young people, young people themselves participate in the development and evaluation of statistical indicators;
- Support youth organisations to commission and carry out research in their work areas;
- Promote more research based on the needs and interests of young people (i.e. young people as a resource rather than a problem). Take into account the particular challenges involved in consulting with young people from more vulnerable groups in society.

AN HARMONISED EUROPEAN METHODOLOGY FOR YOUTH RESEARCH

Member States should:

- Promote a cross-sectoral approach to the understanding of young people;
- Ensure transparent, coherent and comparable European youth research by developing common European indicators in co-operation with young people;
- Promote the status, visibility and dissemination of youth research;
- Establish an annual European call for youth research on specific themes within the 6th European framework programme for research.