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Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy

{SWD(2018) 168 final} - {SWD(2018) 169 final}

1. Towards a new EU Youth Strategy

Young people are keen to take control of their lives and engage with and support others. Yet many face uncertainties about their future, as a result of technological change, demographic trends, discrimination, social exclusion, fake news and populism with yet unknown effects on jobs, skills or the way our democracies work. More than ever, they need to be resilient and able to adapt to these challenges. They should acquire the necessary skills to contribute to prosperous, democratic and cohesive societies in Europe and beyond. In today's interconnected world, many young people are concerned about global issues such as climate change or peace and security.

Despite the economic upturn and lower unemployment, inequalities including between generations persist. For the first time since the Second World War, there is a real risk that today's young generation will end up less well-off than their parents¹. 29% of 16-29 year olds are at risk of poverty or social exclusion and 11.6% of those aged 15-24 are not in education, employment or training (NEETs)², while 15.9 % of the young people in this age group are unemployed - double the rate of the general population. Socio-economic and democratic exclusion go hand in hand³. Youth struggling with disadvantages are generally less active citizens and have less trust in institutions. They also benefit less from mobility experiences including Erasmus+.

Europe cannot afford wasted talent, social exclusion or disengagement among its youth. Young people should not only be architects of their own life, but also contribute to positive change in society. The new European Solidarity Corps is a testimony to the eagerness of many young Europeans to show solidarity towards people and places in need, a core value underlying European cooperation.

EU Leaders endorsed in 2016 the need for action in support of youth⁴. In the Bratislava roadmap⁵, they committed to creating better opportunities for youth, ambitions that were followed up since then, for instance in the work towards a European Education Area⁶.

For young people to reap the full benefits of EU actions, these need to reflect their aspirations, creativity and talents. In turn, young people enrich the EU's ambitions: this generation is the best educated ever and among the most creative in using Information and Communication Technologies and social media.

The EU has already been running a dedicated EU Youth Policy cooperation based on the principles of active participation and equal access to opportunities since 2002, in synergy with other policies targeting young people, such as education and employment. The cooperation prompted policy and legislative changes in the Member States and contributed to capacity-building of youth organisations. But important challenges remain open, such as involving more young people from a more diverse range of backgrounds, including those with fewer opportunities, and a better outreach at grassroots level.

By involving and empowering young women and men, youth policy can contribute to successfully meeting the vision of a continent where young people can seize opportunities and

¹ White Paper on the future of Europe, March 2017.

² Eurostat, 2016.

³ Eurofound – section on NEETs: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/topic/NEETs>.

⁴ Commission Communication on Investing in Europe's Youth (COM(2016)940).

⁵ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21250/160916-bratislava-declaration-and-roadmapen16.pdf>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/towards-european-education-area-2025-2017-nov-14_en

relate to European values, as set out in the Commission Communication on 'Strengthening European Identity through education and culture'⁷.

A renewed EU youth cooperation can help overcome the current participation paradox. Young people show an interest in politics⁸ and are socially active: 53% engage in organised activities, nearly one third are active volunteers and others support a cause through media attention or consumer choice. Yet, they tend to turn away from traditional forms of participation. Youth at risk of social exclusion are underrepresented across the board. Decision-makers need to make participation a reality for all young people: to be transparent about actions in their favour, to reach out and communicate in an accessible way through their preferred channels (like social media) and to promote their involvement in decisions.

The Commission committed to boosting youth participation beyond 2018 in its December 2016 Communication⁹. The Council, in turn, called to 'maintain and enhance effective European cooperation in the youth field post 2018'¹⁰.

Thus, the Commission proposes a new EU Youth Strategy to mark the joint commitment between the Commission and Member States to this policy in full respect of subsidiarity. To align youth policy even more effectively with EU funding supporting its objectives, the strategy should run until the end of the next Multiannual Financial Framework. Its priorities draw upon solid data sources¹¹, an external evaluation¹², positions expressed by European institutions and consultations carried out in 2017 as part of the 'Year of Listening'¹³ and the 'New Narrative for Europe'¹⁴. These unanimously underline that EU youth cooperation has brought tangible benefits and point to its potential. The new strategy will build on the achievements of the previous one, improving its accessibility, visibility and impact to ensure a better participation of young people.

Summary of main actions

- Improve **cross-sector cooperation** across policy areas, including through an **EU Youth Coordinator**, to give youth a voice in shaping EU policies
- **Track** EU spending on youth;
- Launch a new and more inclusive **EU Youth Dialogue**, with a focus on youth with fewer opportunities;
- Remove obstacles to and **facilitate volunteering and solidarity mobility**;
- Implement a **youth work agenda** to increase recognition of non-formal learning;

⁷ Commission Communication on Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture (COM(2017)673).

⁸ Flash Eurobarometer 455.

⁹ Commission Communication on Investing in Europe's Youth (COM(2016)940).

¹⁰ Council Conclusions on strategic perspectives for European cooperation in the youth field post 2018, May 2017.

¹¹ Flash Eurobarometer 455; Eurostat (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/youth/data/database>).

¹² SWD(2017) 280 and SWD(2017) 281 on the evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy.

¹³ Opinions from Member States, the European Parliament, the European Committee of Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee as well as the outcomes of the structured dialogue, focus groups, online consultations and a stakeholder conference. See accompanying Staff Working Document on the results of the open method of coordination in the youth field 2010-2018

¹⁴ http://europa.eu/youth/have-your-say/new-narrative-for-europe_en

- Reinforce the link between EU youth policy and related EU programmes (**Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps**).

2. Engage. Connect. Empower.

EU youth cooperation shall make the most of youth policy's potential. It can foster youth participation in democratic life, in line with Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. It can also support social engagement, as well as civic and socio-educational activities (youth work) that give young people life skills and act as a bridge to society, especially for disadvantaged youth.

In the coming years, the strategy strives to:

- Enable young people to be **architects of their own lives, build their resilience** and equip them with life skills to cope in a changing world;
- Encourage young people to become **active citizens, agents of solidarity and positive change** for communities across Europe, inspired by EU values and a European identity;
- Help prevent **youth social exclusion**;
- Improve the **impact of policy decisions on young people** through dialogue and addressing their needs across sectors.

To this purpose, youth policy cooperation will undertake activities grouped around three areas of action.

ENGAGE: Fostering youth participation in democratic life

CONNECT: Bringing young people together across the EU and beyond to foster voluntary engagement, learning mobility, solidarity and intercultural understanding

EMPOWER: Supporting youth empowerment through quality, innovation and recognition of youth work

The strategy will pay special attention to:

Reaching out to all young people: it should strive to improve the prospects of all young people regardless of their background or social status. Erasmus+ Youth is equipped to reach out to those with fewer opportunities, who make up over 36% of its beneficiaries¹⁵. Yet, more action is needed for EU youth policy and the Erasmus+ programme to be truly inclusive.

Straddling levels from global to local: young people are committed to address global challenges, in particular the sustainable development goals. Conversely, youth empowerment starts at the grassroots level and depends on the diverse situation of young people. EU youth cooperation should better connect with policy makers and practitioners at regional and local level and encourage grassroots initiatives by youth.

... and the virtual world: digital technologies have revolutionised young people's lives in many ways and policies need to consider both opportunities and challenges, by tapping the potential of social media, equipping youth with digital skills and fostering critical thinking and media literacy.

¹⁵ Erasmus+ Annual report 2016.



2.1. ENGAGE

Against the backdrop of reflections on the future of Europe, now is the time to **listen to young people and empower them** to turn their dreams into reality.

Many want to be involved in political life, but expect their opinion to count. Often less engaged than older groups in voting or political parties, they declare an interest in politics and have the most positive feelings towards the EU. The sense of being an EU citizen is stronger among people born after 1980 (73%) than those born before 1946 (54%)¹⁶. As stressed in the EU Citizenship Report 2017¹⁷, youth engagement is crucial in view of the 2019 European Parliament elections.

EU youth policy today engages with young people through the Structured Dialogue¹⁸ which has reached over 200,000 of them since 2010. Whilst it has become an influential tool, the Commission proposes to go a step further and renew it. Building also on lessons learnt from the 'New Narrative for Europe', it should **enlarge its outreach** beyond youth organisations active in EU matters and embrace a more diverse audience, including at local level. It should better target disadvantaged groups, for example by building on the inclusion and diversity strategy¹⁹ under Erasmus+, while also tapping the expertise of young experts and researchers. In addition to the appreciated EU Youth conferences and meetings, the EU Youth Dialogue will **embrace new and alternative forms of participation, including online campaigns**, consultations via digital platforms connected to the European Youth Portal. The dialogue will be coordinated at EU level, fed by youth at all levels and supported by National Working Groups with improved monitoring arrangements. It should be **transparent and visible** in terms of impact. To allow young people to form their opinion based on facts and arguments, access to quality information is essential.

EU level cooperation will focus on:

- **Launching a new EU Youth Dialogue** for diverse youth voices to contribute to EU policy decisions;
- **Consolidating the European Youth Portal** as a digital single entry point for young people to engage with the EU;
- **Stepping up youth participation** in democratic life including access to quality information validated by trusted sources, and promoting participation in **European and other elections**;
- **Supporting ‘learning to participate’** and raising interest in participatory actions across Europe and beyond through **Erasmus+**.

Member States are encouraged to focus on:

- **Promoting dialogue and participatory mechanisms at all levels of decision-making**, for example through youth councils, paying special attention to feedback mechanisms and outreach to youth with diverse backgrounds. This could include

¹⁶ Standard Eurobarometer 86, 2016.

¹⁷ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-118_en.htm

¹⁸ Structured dialogue is the consultative process for youth under the 2010-2018 strategy.

¹⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/reports/inclusion-diversity-strategy_en.pdf

support to public authorities to take up participatory practices, for instance via toolkits;

- **Encouraging social and civic engagement of young people** including participation in youth organisations or online activism;
- **Helping prepare young people for participation**, through youth work, youth parliaments or simulations, actions around civic education and media literacy in synergy with formal education and public authorities;
- Exploring innovative and alternative **forms of democratic participation**;
- **Using tools to promote debate** about the EU, such as the toolkit developed under the 'New Narrative for Europe'.



2.2. CONNECT

The Youth Strategy will underpin **opportunities** for young people to experience exchanges, cooperation and civic action in a European context first hand.

Erasmus+, one of the EU's most successful instruments, helps young people expand their horizons and build bridges across the continent and beyond. From 2014 to 2020 more than 500,000 participants will have gained experience and skills abroad through youth exchanges and volunteering. The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges²⁰ enable dialogue between youth in the EU and in Southern Mediterranean countries. Such experiences enhance employability and help develop an understanding of European values and tolerance²¹. The EU should **expand innovative ways of bringing young people together**, whilst capitalising on well-tested formats such as youth exchanges and cooperation between youth organisations.

Young people are increasingly getting engaged in volunteering²², yet only 8% do so abroad. The EU has been supporting volunteering for more than 20 years. This support is now proposed to be expanded to offer new opportunities for youth to express solidarity (such as jobs or traineeships) under the European Solidarity Corps. To realise its **full potential** and ensure that national schemes allow for cross-border experiences, the Commission and Member States should cooperate on a supportive policy, legal and administrative environment.

²⁰ <https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual>

²¹ http://www.researchyouth.net/documents/ra_y_policybrief_2014.pdf

²² 31% of young people have taken part in voluntary activities in the last 12 months (6-point increase since 2014, Eurobarometer 455).

EU level cooperation will focus on:

- **Connecting young people across Europe and beyond**, taking into account the experience from ‘**European Youth Together**’²³, building networks of young people from different parts of Europe, the Erasmus+ **Virtual Exchanges** and other actions under Erasmus+ Youth;
- **Supporting the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps** through policy cooperation and community-building, in particular through **updating and expanding the 2008 Council Recommendation on the cross-border mobility of volunteers**, and further strengthening the potential of the **European Solidarity Corps Portal** in reaching out to youth and helping build a community;
- **Increasing participation in cross-border learning mobility and solidarity** under **Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps** with an emphasis on those with fewer opportunities.

Member States are encouraged to focus on:

- **Encouraging young people's engagement in solidarity:** Promoting support schemes and capacity-building of organisations active in this area, raising awareness of opportunities and providing information about rights and benefits when volunteering or in a civic service. When developing national schemes, Member States should seek complementarity and synergies with the European Solidarity Corps;
- **Reviewing and removing legal and administrative barriers to cross-border solidarity:** Member States should identify and undertake to remove obstacles for young people willing to engage in cross-border volunteering (in terms of social benefits, health insurance, etc.);
- **Promoting recognition of volunteering experiences and validation of learning outcomes:** the skills that volunteers develop deserve to be recognised in the labour market, besides the intrinsic value volunteering brings to society.



2.3. EMPOWER

Youth work brings unique benefits to young people in their transition to adulthood²⁴, providing a safe environment for them to gain self-confidence, and learn in a non-formal way. Youth work is known for equipping youth with key competences and skills such as teamwork, leadership, intercultural competences, project management, problem solving and critical thinking. In some cases, youth work is the bridge into

education, training or work, thus preventing exclusion.

To reap these benefits, there is a **greater need for recognition** of non-formal learning through youth work, especially beneficial to those with little formal qualifications, as a way to

²³ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/funding/european-youth-together-eacea162018_en

²⁴ Expert group on the 'contribution of youth work and non-formal and informal learning to address the challenges young people are facing, in particular the transition from education to employment'. http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/reports/contribution-youth-work-summary_en.pdf

improve employability and entrepreneurial skills. Recognition can be improved by a more systematic use of **quality tools**.

Youth workers themselves, on the other hand, need to adapt to changing needs and habits of young people and **technological change**. Youth workers have to upgrade their skills to understand the issues youth face online and exploit new opportunities offered by digital learning, in line with the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens²⁵ and the Digital Education Action Plan²⁶. Youth work has suffered from funding cuts in many parts of Europe²⁷, such investment is therefore often challenging.

EU level cooperation will focus on implementing a Youth Work Agenda for quality, innovation and recognition of youth work:

- Developing and disseminating **practical toolkits** for quality youth work;
- Supporting grassroots activities addressing **recognition, innovation and capacity-building of youth work** under Erasmus+;
- Supporting mutual learning and evidence building on **digital youth work, youth worker skills and financing** of youth work.

Member States are encouraged to focus on:

- **Developing quality:** quality tools and systems to be used in the training of youth workers should correspond to the changing circumstances of young people's lives and be embedded in a broader quality approach to empower organisations.
- **Adapting to digital opportunities:** the structure, methods and communication channels of youth work should adapt to the digital world: it should use technology and pedagogical practices to increase access and help young people cope with digital means. Digital youth work should be incorporated into youth workers' training and – where they exist – youth work occupational and competence standards.
- **Promoting recognition:** to underpin the value of youth work for those young people involved in it, appropriate and accepted recognition tools should be developed in line with the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the agenda on skills development²⁸.
- **Reaching out to all young people, in particular those with fewer opportunities:** youth work has a unique potential to reach out to the most vulnerable ones and address their individual needs.

²⁵ Also known as DigComp

²⁶ COM(2018) 22 final.

²⁷ Study 'Working with young people: the value of youth work in the EU', ICF-GHK, 2014, European Commission.

²⁸ 'Education and Training 2020' (2015/C 417/04), A New Skills Agenda for Europe, COM(2016) 381.

3. Effective, focused and joined-up implementation across sectors

3.1. Working across sectors

The situation of youth in Europe is diverse and marked by challenges to be addressed in different policy areas. Despite positive trends such as greater participation in higher education, a drop in the share of those leaving school early and decreasing (though still high) youth unemployment rates²⁹, big challenges, often inter-related, persist. Among these are very high youth unemployment in certain Member States, regions and groups, growing youth poverty, precarious employment, unequal access to quality education or health issues.

In this context, tackling youth unemployment and high rates of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) has been an EU priority, supported by specific initiatives: more than 3.5 million young people have benefitted each year from the Youth Guarantee launched in 2013. The European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative together invest €14.5 billion directly in youth employment measures from 2014 to 2020. Despite progress, the EU Youth Strategy and the evaluation report on the Youth Guarantee implementation in Member States emphasised the need to build bridges between the youth and employment sectors and to reach out more effectively to NEETs facing multiple barriers. In addition, the Action Plan on the integration of third-country nationals³⁰ and the Communication on the protection of children in migration³¹ acknowledged the importance of supporting the integration of young migrants and refugees.

Not all eight fields of action³² delivered similarly positive results; according to the evaluation they were too broad. No Member State addressed all of these fields, as they did not have the same relevance across the board.

To increase effectiveness, the Commission proposes a two-fold approach:

1) Strengthen the youth perspective across policy areas at EU level, by:

- **Ensuring the concerns of young people are heard in EU policy making**, notably through an **EU Youth Coordinator** who would be a European Commission contact and visible reference point for young people. The EU Youth Coordinator's mission would be to provide advice on youth policy to the Commissioner in charge; to help ensure coordination and coherence, and raise awareness of the EU's action in the area in close co-operation with EU institutions and agencies as well as with Member States; and to share outcomes of the EU Youth Dialogue and give feedback to young people, including via the European Youth Portal and the EU Youth Strategy Platform³³;

²⁹ Accompanying Staff Working Document on the situation of young people in the EU.

³⁰ COM(2016) 377

³¹ COM(2017) 211 final

³² Education and training, Employment and entrepreneurship, Health and well-being, Participation, Voluntary activities, Social inclusion, Youth and the world, Creativity and culture.

³³ The EU Youth Coordinator would be an adviser working in the services, supported by the Directorate-General in charge of youth policy. The Coordinator's tasks would include leading the new EU Youth Dialogue on the Commission side, processing views of young people and the results of the EU Youth Dialogue to share them with relevant Commission services as well as relating with the European Parliament and national policy-makers. The Coordinator would also serve as a first contact point for young people and their representatives and steer information and communication actions directed at young people, in cooperation with other relevant parts of the Commission.

- Enhancing **transparency on EU action** for young people, including tracking of EU spending on young people³⁴;
- Promoting **participatory models of policy-making** involving young people, such as **Youth Policy Labs**³⁵;
- **Supporting Member States in developing youth policies**, through gathering evidence, mutual learning and sharing good practices, including new tools such as peer reviews and peer counselling;
- Contributing via youth cooperation instruments such as mutual learning, evidence, the Coordinator or the Dialogue, to **cross-sectoral initiatives** for youth, such as the Youth Guarantee, the European Apprentices Network³⁶ and the Tartu call for a Healthy Lifestyle³⁷.

2) Sharpen the strategy's focus: the Commission invites Member States to concentrate on targeted actions translating EU priorities into the national context, to be identified in **National Action Plans**.

These plans should draw on cross-sectoral cooperation between youth and other policy areas, building on existing governance mechanisms, for instance as part of the delivery of the national Youth Guarantee scheme.

They should ensure strong links between **transnational cooperation activities**³⁸ of National Agencies implementing the Erasmus+ programme and the areas identified in National Action Plans to enhance the coherence between policy and programme implementation.

Cross-sectoral cooperation should be reinforced **at all levels of decision-making** searching synergies, complementarity between actions, and including greater youth involvement. Member States should encourage youth and other stakeholders to set up joint initiatives, for example in education, employment, digital, sport, sustainability and international cooperation, using the full potential of EU funding.

During the 2017 'Year of Listening', stakeholders raised the following challenges which could serve as areas for mainstreaming actions: education - training; employment - entrepreneurship; health, including mental health; poverty - social exclusion; integration of youth with a migrant background³⁹; internet - media literacy; sustainability - climate change.

³⁴ This would concern funding targeting individuals, also using estimates in order to avoid creating extra administrative burden in terms of reporting and data collection notably for programmes such as currently named Erasmus+; European Solidarity Corps; Employment and Social Innovation Programme; Horizon 2020; Creative Europe; Europe for Citizens; Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme; EU Health Programme; Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (COSME); Youth Employment Initiative; European Structural and Investment Funds; Young Farmers' Scheme (Common Agricultural Policy); EU Aid Volunteer; European Neighbourhood Instrument.

³⁵ The first Youth Policy Lab took place in 2017 with three neighbourhood countries: <https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/eupolicylab/>

³⁶ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1147>

³⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/sport/news/20170922-ewos-navracsics-health-call-tartu_fr

³⁸ Activities organised by Erasmus+ National Agencies.

³⁹ Foreign-born young and native with foreign-born parent represented 20% of those aged 15-29 in the EU in 2014, and this share is projected to increase quickly due to inflows of migrants since the beginning of the 2000s.

3.2. Multi-level and participatory governance

Governance will be improved by:

Evidence-based policy making and monitoring: Effective implementation relies on strong evidence. The **Dashboard of youth indicators** has become an appreciated tool to monitor trends in the situation of youth. EU cooperation should additionally explore the use of **policy indicators** to monitor the implementation of the strategy⁴⁰. A policy review of EU funded research projects will be conducted in 2019 to extract relevant findings for this area.

Focus and flexibility: The strategy will focus on shared EU youth priorities across Member States, while allowing flexibility in pursuing mainstreaming actions to adapt EU priorities to national circumstances. The Council is expected to set tri-annual **EU Work Plans** with the Commission.

Participatory governance: A new **platform** will give stakeholders a greater role in coordinating the implementation of the strategy, offering opportunities to exchange information on activities and results. The Commission will organise dedicated meetings for representatives of youth organisations, civil society organisations, EU institutions, and social partners.

Streamlined reporting and evaluation: The Commission will report on implementation every three years, based on information provided by Member States, the Youth Wiki⁴¹ and indicators. This will include information on the use of the EU programmes in reaching policy objectives. The Commission will conduct an interim evaluation in 2023, and possibly a review in 2024. Member States are encouraged to do the same.

Mutual learning and dissemination: Expert groups will continue to develop policy guidance, practical tools and share good practices; the strategy will offer new tools for mutual learning, such as peer reviews and peer counselling. It will pursue a more systematic approach to quality youth information, outreach and dissemination, building on its existing networks.

Mobilising EU programmes and funds: The strategy will promote effective use of EU programmes and funds, such as Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, European Structural and Investment Funds, Horizon 2020, including the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, Creative Europe, and their successors. The Commission calls on Member States to explore synergies between funding sources at EU, national, regional and local levels.

Conclusions and next steps

Young people have legitimate ambitions for their future in Europe. In turn, Europe needs to offer them better life chances and act upon their concerns.

The strategy will forge a stronger link between the EU and young people through inclusive and digital ways of dialogue, bring effective results through focused priorities and actions, and provide a more effective structure to capture and transmit young people's ideas and share information about actions taken in their favour.

All this will be supported by stronger links to EU funds. The Youth Strategy will also seek greater ownership by stakeholders through more youth involvement and new platforms at EU level and beyond. Flexible setting of priorities and implementation at EU level will make it

⁴⁰ Proposal included in the accompanying Staff Working Document on the results of the open method of coordination.

⁴¹ <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/youthwiki>

more relevant for local realities, while respecting the competences of every level of governance, and with the support of the European Commission.

The Commission invites the Council to endorse the proposed EU Youth Strategy for 2019-2027, building also on the Youth Goals⁴² proposed during the EU Youth Conference in April 2018.

The Council is further invited to adopt a Work Plan for 2019-2021, taking into account the measures proposed in this Communication and elaborated in the Staff Working Document on the results of the open method of coordination.

⁴² <http://www.youthgoals.eu/>