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Y.E.S. Forum Position on the Future European Cooperation on Youth Policy

About the Y.E.S. Forum

The Y.E.S. Forum can contribute to the policy process as its strength is in its day to day work for young people through its member organisations and partners. The Y.E.S. Forum is a network of 22 organisations in across 14 countries in the EU. It is bound together by a commitment to the social inclusion and active participation of all children and young people who experience disadvantage and exclusion.

The Y.E.S. Forum aims to foster a sustainable dialogue about the needs and interests of young people with fewer opportunities amongst the various stakeholders including young people themselves, youth and social workers, as well as decision makers. Hence the Y.E.S. Forum seeks:

- to encourage professional networking and exchange of good practice amongst youth workers, social workers and other professionals,
- to support peer-to-peer contact and greater mobility between young people from different European countries,
- to develop and promote new ways of thinking in youth social work and
- to transfer experience and knowledge from the practical field to actively influence European politics on youth and social affairs.

In order to contribute to these goals the Y.E.S. Forum organises training, seminars and conferences that provide space for exchange of good practice and critical thinking. Using web community tools, the Y.E.S. Forum facilitates forums for discussion and consultations. It also strongly encourages the involvement of the members in transnational project cooperation involving young people and practitioners.

The Y.E.S. Forum comments

1. Achievements in European cooperation on youth policy

In fact, the White Paper on a new impetus for European youth (2001) marked a new stage in European action in youth affairs. It emphasised on cooperation between Member States and was followed by the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) applied in the fields: “participation”, “information”, “voluntary activities” and “a greater understanding and knowledge of youth”. With the European Youth Pact adopted in 2005 as part of the revised Lisbon strategy the view was also on strengthening education and training as well as social inclusion of young people. A further step is the cross-sectoral approach fostering the cooperation between policy fields impacting on youth.

All this led to a greater recognition of youth affairs in the public and intensified the cooperation between the EU Member States.

Responsibility for youth affairs rests with the Member States. That's why implementation of European initiatives in youth affairs depends to a great extent on the commitment of the Member States and regional and local governments. Yet, European initiatives have still less impact on the regional and local level unless civil Society and NGOs are more involved in this. There is a need to bridge the gap between European, national and regional level.

It is quite difficult to evaluate whether and how progress at national and regional level is related to the EU cooperation framework. One of the reasons is that lots of the topics were already on national political agendas even before it has been discussed at European level.

There is no structured communication of the various tools; it is difficult to find information about progress of the Member States. Hence, based on fragments of available information, it is almost impossible to evaluate the progress of the Member States.

2. Political instruments on youth policy

In general the Y.E.S. Forum thinks that the political instruments are appropriate. But the tools need to be critical revised, improved and possibly merged. The procedures seem to be applied in parallel and there are thematic overlaps between the OMC and the follow up of the European Youth Pact.

The implementation of the OMC at national level is not satisfactory. The compilation of the reports is time-intensive and requires big administrative effort. The immediate benefit of the reports is not visible, specifically for those who work directly with young people. Further it is not clear and transparent which criteria are applied by the Commission to elaborate the joint report. Simple and easy understandable information about the OMC procedure and its results is missing. Hence it is quite difficult for the local level and for the practitioners to contribute to the process. It seems like knowledge for experts only and not accessible for the practitioners, those who are daily working with young people. Youth social work is almost not involved in the OMC.

The Structured Dialogue is a follow-up to the White Paper on Youth, which highlights the importance of consulting young people on matters which concern them.

But the debate is not structured in terms of who is responsible for setting themes and timing. There are no overall frame and transparent procedures. Young people can only discuss on predetermined themes with EU politicians on special events, such as the European Youth week.

The Structured Dialogue needs to ensure that a large range of young people and a broad spectrum of youth organisations will be represented at European youth events. In complement to the European Youth Forum a wider spectrum of organisations need to be involved in order to reach the larger diversity of young people, including those with fewer opportunities or not formally organised.

3. Future challenges for EU cooperation on youth policy

Considering the fast changing social economic environment, it is necessary to provide the young people with resources and skills to deal with these challenges.

With regard to youth policy, the Y.E.S. Forum sees the following points as main challenges in the future:

- High-quality education and vocational training as well as recognition of non-formal learning and informal learning
- Appropriate work and living conditions for young people

- Opportunities for participation of young people in society and in political processes which are of concern for them

Furthermore questions related to life-long learning, demographic changes and cultural diversity will also be of importance.

To bring youth policy forward, institutions that work directly with young people with fewer opportunities need to be involved, especially professionals such as youth workers, social workers, street workers etc. The Y.E.S. Forum thinks that the peer-learning on better participation on young people with fewer opportunities is a good example how Member States could exchange best practice, debate and learn from each other. Path-breaking has also been the conference on 3 – 4 March 2008 on “Participation of young people with fewer opportunities”, where for the first time practitioners were invited and listened to.

The Y.E.S. Forum recommendations and demands

To achieve progress in cooperation on youth policy the Y.E.S. Forum calls for critically revised, improved and possibly merged policy tools. The OMC process on the one hand and the follow up of the Youth Pact on the other, are currently moving in parallel. For practitioners and organisations working directly with young people, these tools are mostly far from their reality.

The Y.E.S. Forum suggests and puts forward the following points to be considered in the future European cooperation on youth policy:

Young people are a positive driving force

Young people should not be seen as problems but as contributors and resources to society. They should be involved and heard to be able to present their solutions. In order to be part of a structured dialogue young people need to have simple access to information and where and when they can take part in the dialogue. Sharing information is not only a task of the European Commission; it is a main responsibility of the Member States. There is a need to coherent information strategies and a greater variety of methodologies in order to reach young people at regional and local level.

Non-formal and informal learning

We are promoting informal and non-formal learning as a method for disadvantaged young people. Learning does not take place only in formal environment. Especially, for disadvantaged people other forms of learning like non-formal and informal learning have great significance. Youth policy should better recognise these aspects. Further non-formal and informal learning should be better linked to other policies.

Simplified procedures and tools at EU level

National reports and the joint report must be communicated in a structured and diverse way in order to succeed transfer of good practice. Aims and agreements of the Member States must be mandatory implemented. There is a need for clear indicators and benchmarks for measuring progress. Reporting must be simplified and more effective. Further commitment is needed to make youth policy an integral element of other relevant policies (cross-sectoral approach).

Improving coordination at national level

There is a need for better coordination and transfer of information from national to regional and local level. In accordance to the structure in each Member State there is a need for better and understandable information, for sustainable procedures of involving the great variety of organisations working with and for young people and support measures of youth

organisations. Common goals at European level must be related to the specific situation in the Member States and translated to concrete national action plans.

Establishing a European Youth Report

The Y.E.S. Forum is supporting the idea of introducing a European Youth Report which beside quantitative elements would use participatory and qualitative measures. The report should focus each time on different topics of current importance. So it should serve as a source of providing analysis on young people's life and challenges. Further this report could support advices for policy development.

Experiencing Europe and EU Programmes

Youth participation is about to give young people the means to participate and to ensure that they know about policy developments and programmes. Due to our specific experience in the work with young people with fewer opportunities, we believe in an inclusive approach in youth work. To bring youth policy forward, institutions that work directly with young people with fewer opportunities need to be involved in European programmes and debates, especially professionals such as youth workers, social workers, street workers etc. Hence it is necessary to develop sustainable structures for dialogue and exchange of experience among practitioners.

Support for organisations

It is important to strengthen the wide range of organisations that are working with and for young people. Beside project work there is a need for long term support and sustainable structures in youth and social work. To promote European cooperation in the youth field it is important that young people themselves are benefiting from the various EU programmes. In complement to the Youth in Action Programme, the European Social Fund could provide more opportunities for young people.

Better recognition of youth and social work

Youth and social workers play a key role in reaching and involving young people in society. It is of great importance that the daily work of these professionals is recognised. In order to ensure high quality in their work, there is a need for improved training of youth and social workers, both initial and further training. Hence it is important to have compatible professional standards and consistent curricula in training.

The Y.E.S. Forum sincerely hopes that these recommendations will be helpful in the future policy process. Indeed, the Y.E.S. Forum and its members are delighted to provide their expertise and experience to this process in any way possible.

Stuttgart, November 2008