



# POSITION PAPER ON STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper sets out the position of the European Youth Forum regarding the further development of the structured dialogue process. The Forum advocates for:

- ⤴ Youth involvement in deciding the overall priority of any future cycle of the structured dialogue.
- ⤴ A focus on one overall priority for any future cycle, looking at different aspects of this overall priority in each phase and working towards one, representative and meaningful outcome.
- ⤴ An emphasis on dialogue and the joint decision-making of young people and policymakers remain the focus of the process.
- ⤴ Setting up a European Working Group for future cycles.
- ⤴ The need for online visibility of the process in line with the recommendations of European Youth Week 2011.
- ⤴ That National Youth Councils remain the key youth stakeholders at national level.
- ⤴ National Working Groups become closely associated with the EU Youth Report, as the main reporting tool foreseen within the Open Method of Coordination.
- ⤴ The continuation of the structured dialogue process until at least the end of the EU Youth Strategy in 2018.
- ⤴ In the future the Structured Dialogue should develop into the main place at EU level where youth is co-managing youth affairs

## **BACKGROUND**

The implementation of the structured dialogue process has so far been organised according to the results of stakeholder negotiation at European level. This, in turn, has led to variations in the execution of each cycle of the structured dialogue and raises questions as to which methods and practices are the most desirable and effective for all those involved.

After several evaluation exercises, the European Youth Forum wishes to build a stronger position regarding how the structured dialogue with young people should be implemented, as well as regarding how to continue improving its inclusivity, develop its priorities and strengthen the visibility and communication of the process.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Now in its second cycle, the structured dialogue has become an established process for participatory youth policy-making in the EU. Its principles are set down in a number of Council of the European Union Resolutions beginning with the 2005<sup>1</sup> Resolution inviting the European Commission and EU Member States to develop a structured dialogue with young people and their organisations, researchers in the youth field and policymakers.

The concept of the structured dialogue was further supported by the 2006 Resolution<sup>2</sup> stating that due account should be taken of the structured dialogue and its outcomes at the relevant levels of policymaking. A key part of this is youth participation in the Informal Forum at which the Trio Presidency's Ministers and

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1 OJ C 292, 25.11.2005, p.5

2 OJ C 297, 12.2006, p.6

National Youth Councils meet with the EU Commissioner for Education and Culture and the European Youth Forum in order to ensure consistency and continuity between agendas in the youth field.

The 2009 Resolution<sup>3</sup> on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the Youth field then highlighted the importance of upholding the right of young people to participate in the development of policies affecting them by means of a continuous structured dialogue with young people and youth organisations within the framework of three vital structures: National Working Groups at Member States level, the European Steering Committee and EU Youth Conferences at European level.

In 2011, the Resolution on the structured dialogue<sup>4</sup> asked Member States and the European Commission, within their respective spheres of competence to take note of the conclusions of the structured dialogue and to design channels of communication and cooperation with other relevant policy fields and departments promoting policies and actions targeted at young people.

However, to achieve the highest level of involvement of young people and youth organisations in decision making at EU level and learning from our experiences and good practices from the Council of Europe, the Structured Dialogue should in the future develop into a system of co-management on youth affairs. This will put the European youth policy at the forefront of including civil society in its governance.

## **STRUCTURES**

The structured dialogue is a continuous process with the aim of securing political outcomes. Its structures are set down in the Council Resolution for a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field.<sup>5</sup> Among other relevant stakeholders in each phase, National Working Groups made up of representatives from National Youth Council(s), the ministry responsible for youth affairs; and National Agencies for the Youth in Action Programme conduct consultations with young people and policymakers at national level, including the local and regional levels wherever possible. The results of their joint consultations are collected in a national report, which is then sent to the European Steering Committee.

The European Steering Committee, made up of representatives from the European Commission, the Trio Presidency and the European Youth Forum, compiles the reports including input sent by National Working Groups, International Non Governmental Youth Organisations and other international partners into one or more background documents for a EU Youth Conference. The Steering Committee is also responsible for the overall coordination, monitoring, evaluation and promotion of the process and its outcomes. At EU Youth Conferences, youth representatives and policymakers work together and present a joint message to the EU.

### **The Informal Forum**

The European Youth Forum appreciates the Informal Forum as an opportunity for high-level exchange and discussion with policymakers in order to ensure continuity

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<sup>3</sup> OJ C 311, 19.12.2009, p.1

<sup>4</sup> OJ C 164, 2.6.2011, p.8

<sup>5</sup> OJC 311, 19.12.2009

between the different agendas in the youth field at European level. However, the European Youth Forum would like to see more consistency in, and the better use of, this platform.

- ⤴ **The European Youth Forum advocates for an Informal Forum, which addresses the structured dialogue in a consistent and coherent manner. The Informal Forum could be better utilised as a further opportunity to communicate and discuss the outcomes of the process and, at the same time, be developed as an opportunity for the assessment, evaluation and follow-up of the process. The results of the Informal Forum should be communicated to and reviewed by the European Steering Committee and National Working Groups.**

### **European Steering Committee**

Young people should continue to lead and be represented in the steering of the structured dialogue process in order to ensure a continuous youth perspective in the facilitation of the process.

- ⤴ **It is of utmost importance that the European Steering Committee continues to be youth-led and chaired by the European Youth Forum. The European Youth Forum believes that all stakeholders should share tasks and resources linked to the secretariat of the European Steering Committee, and responsibilities should be coordinated among them.**

### **National Working Groups**

The diversity of National Working Groups can be a particularly challenging factor to effective communication and visibility. Several Member States face great difficulties in reaching people at local and regional level and should be given sufficient time to do so

Feedback from National Working Groups was addressed in a letter from the European Steering Committee dated 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2011, in which all stakeholders committed to foresee difficulties, wherever possible, relating to the time of year and length of national consultations in future phases of the process, as well as to endeavour to communicate in a clear and timely fashion with National Working Groups. Nevertheless, obstacles such as holidays, exam periods, or changing dates remain a heavy burden for National Working Groups.

The European Youth Forum has and will continue to advocate strongly for the longest national consultation periods possible and improved communication with National Working Groups. So far, a great deal of the success of the process has been due to the innovative efforts of National Working Groups to reach young people and engage them in consultation despite a number of formidable obstacles.

- ⤴ **Wherever possible, the diverse national situations and foreseeable difficulties of National Working Groups should be taken into account in the planning and steering of the structured dialogue process. Moreover, the European Youth Forum will work to ensure that information is disseminated from the European Steering Committee to National Working Groups in a clear and timely manner.**

## **The role of National Youth Councils**

The legitimacy and value of the structured dialogue process lies in that it provides a space for young people and policymakers to work and discuss together. Through this work, and through leading National Working Groups, National Youth Councils have created concrete relations with their ministries responsible for youth affairs. Successful relations developed through the structured dialogue process are vital not only to the structured dialogue, but also for raising further issues of importance to young people at Member State level.

- ✦ **National Youth Councils should remain the key youth stakeholders in the structured dialogue at national level, empowered to take the leading role in National Working Groups. National Youth Councils should receive adequate support through the future youth programme and from national authorities, to effectively participate in the process of structured dialogue.**

## **EU Youth Conferences**

EU Youth Conferences, organised by the rotating Presidencies of the Council of the EU, gather representatives of youth ministries and youth delegates from Member States, as well as representatives from the European Commission, the European Youth Forum and representatives from International Non Governmental Youth Organisations. They constitute an important opportunity for direct input to policy-making at EU level, as well as an occasion for exchange of views between young people and policy makers. So far the EU Youth Conferences have not fully exploited this potential for dialogue. This dimension should be further developed in the future, and more relevant stakeholders should be invited to take part, as, for example, Members of the European Parliament.

- ✦ **The European Youth Forum advocates for an enhanced focus on the dialogue and joint discussions of young people and policy makers at EU Youth Conferences leading to tangible political outcomes.**

## **FURTHERING INCLUSIVITY IN THE PROCESS**

### **An emphasis on dialogue**

The European Youth Forum works to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their own lives, by representing and advocating their needs and interests and those of their organisations towards the European institutions. The position of the Forum is that all stakeholders should work towards improving the inclusivity of the structured dialogue process, wherever possible, but still within the scope of its structures.

- ✦ **The European Youth Forum is firmly of the opinion that the structured dialogue should remain a space for the mutual exchange of ideas, and that the focus and purpose of the process is not to consult as many young people as possible on a given topic. On the contrary, national consultations should provide only the basis for discussion and joint**

reflection between young people and policymakers at national and European level on the priorities, implementation and follow-up of cooperation in the youth field as well as on national topics.

- **The European Youth Forum advocates a continued emphasis on dialogue and the participation of young people in discussions with policymakers in which both stakeholders are given an equal opportunity to give their input while working towards common goals. Supporting and building the capacity of National Youth Councils will enable them to reach out to more young people, building on their previous experience and consolidating their valuable relations with other national stakeholders. The structured dialogue process and the results of consultations should be used to further develop and organise dialogue between young people and policy-makers at all levels.**

### **The need for a European Working Group**

While the European Youth Forum willingly acts as a key facilitator of the structured dialogue process, not all of its Member Organisations are able to contribute with content to the consultation process. International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations remain under-represented in the process of structured dialogue, in the consultation phases and at EU Youth Conferences. Their participation should be strengthened. For the first time International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations were successfully consulted under the Polish Presidency, and provided valuable, expert input. Therefore, the European Youth Forum advocates for setting up a European Working Group for future structured dialogue cycles. Such a working group would enable International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations, international Trade Unions, the European Parliament, the Committee of Regions and the European Youth Forum itself to contribute content to the consultation phases of the process and prepare their participation to the EU Youth Conferences. The European Working Group is established to strengthen the presence and involvement of INGYOs and other international organisations, and brings a European perspective to the structured dialogue process. Its composition, leadership and working structure should be agreed by involved stakeholders. The members of the European Working Group should be selected in a transparent, inclusive and democratic process, ensuring that the representation reflects the diversity of the membership.

- ✧ **The European Youth Forum advocates for the setting up of a European Working Group for future cycles of the structured dialogue process, as well as the equal participation of International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations to the EU Youth Conferences.**

## **DEVELOPING THE PRIORITIES OF THE PROCESS**

With the beginning of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union on the 1st of July 2011, the new Trio-Presidency (Poland-Denmark-Cyprus) entered into the second, 18 months cycle of the structured dialogue with young people. Inspired by Article 165 of the Lisbon Treaty, the overall thematic priority for the cycle was set by the Trio-Presidency as youth participation in democratic life.

The European Steering Committee committed itself to achieving concrete political

outcomes at the end of the present cycle of the structured dialogue: building upon the successes of the initial cycle on youth employment which resulted in a Council Resolution on the structured dialogue with young people on youth employment on 19 May 2011; Council Conclusions on promoting youth employment to achieve the Europe 2020 objectives on 17 June 2011; and the participation of two EU Commissioners and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso in European Youth Week 2011.

### **Cyclical priorities**

The 2009 Council Resolution on a renewed framework for cooperation in the youth field describes the structured dialogue with young people as a forum for continuous joint reflection on the priorities, implementation and follow-up of European cooperation in the youth field, but the same Resolution gives the Council of the EU overall competence in setting the priorities of the work cycles for European cooperation in the youth field allowing each Presidency to then choose a specific priority linked to the overall theme.

As yet, there is no procedure for consulting young people or youth representatives on the overall priority, nor an obligation to consult them. The Youth Forum wishes to secure the commitment of all stakeholders to include young people at every stage of the structured dialogue process, as well as to ensure that young people are consulted on the issues which impact on them the most, are interesting to young people and promote genuine participation.

The European Youth Forum believes the structured dialogue should serve as a means of defining a common political agenda for Member States, the European Union institutions and youth organisations.

- ✧ **In preparation for any future cycle of the structured dialogue, the Forum, based on a consultation with its member organisations, will aim to negotiate with the incoming Trio-Presidency in order to secure young people's input to the Presidencies' priorities in the youth field. The Forum will propose an overall thematic priority to the Trio-Presidency, for the sake of the structured dialogue in the youth field, in negotiations outside of the European Steering Committee.**

### **Presidential priorities**

At national level, EU Member States engage in different ways with the organisation of their Presidency of the Council of the EU. In many cases the priorities of an individual Presidency are planned years in advance and decided by the ministry responsible for foreign affairs. This means that National Youth Council involvement in setting a Presidency's national sub-priority for any given phase of the structured dialogue is subject to significant variation. At neither level, national or European, is enough weight given to the opinion of young people in setting the priorities of the structured dialogue process and this should be considered during the negotiation of any future cycle.

- **Wherever a Trio-Presidency opts to theme their national consultations along the lines of a Presidential sub-priority, the European Youth Forum advocates that these priorities be jointly agreed with the respective**

**Member States' National Youth Councils. The main aim of the sub-priority should not be advancing the Presidency's political agenda, but clearly reflecting the overall priority of the cycle and addressing its different aspects. The overall priority as well as sub-priorities should be of interest to young people across the EU in all Member States and should lead towards a collective final outcome.**

### **Structuring the priorities of a cycle**

During this second cycle, Poland, Denmark and Cyprus have been focusing on different national priorities related to youth participation in their national consultations and at EU Youth Conferences (youth in the world, creativity and innovation and participation and social inclusion respectively). Each Presidency expects to produce its own Council Conclusions on their national priority with a fourth and final Council Resolution on youth participation also foreseen for the end of the cycle.

This is unlike the first cycle on youth employment, in which the Trio-Presidency initially focused on one final outcome for the 18 months process and to which the national consultations of each Presidency contributed input on different aspects of the same overall theme of youth employment.

While the Forum welcomes the commitment of the current Trio to produce three Council Conclusions and a final Resolution over the short 18 month period of the cycle, an over-abundance of documents may lead to somewhat rushed and relatively shallow results. Over-burdening National Working Groups with the pressure to involve young people in three very separate consultations over such short periods risks resulting in poor quality data - as identified by National Working Groups themselves - and therefore a poorer basis for later discussion at EU level, particularly given the limited timeframe. Moreover, National Working Groups are unable to build the same working relationships with cross-sectorial stakeholders and researchers at Member State level than they would do given more time and a long-term focus.

The European Youth Forum advocates a coherent structured dialogue. Wherever possible the relevant institutions and actors involved should work towards one common goal by means of a participatory and well-structured process.

- ✧ **The Trio-Presidency should, together with young people and the European Commission, identify one overall priority for a cycle of the structured dialogue, addressing different aspects of this theme while working towards a collective final outcome. This would ensure that enough time is given to address the priority meaningfully; that National Working Groups would have the opportunity to develop solid working relationships with relevant experts and contacts at national level; and that the joint work and recommendations of the process would be developed to such a quality that their final input would not only be more representative, but also more concrete and less vulnerable to being watered-down at the whim of an individual Presidency.**

## **FOLLOW-UP AND IMPLEMENTATION**

The 2009 Council Resolution on a renewed framework for cooperation in the youth

field describes the structured dialogue with young people as a forum for continuous joint reflection on the priorities, implementation and follow-up of European cooperation in the youth field. However, in practice the follow-up of the structured dialogue process is left to each stakeholder at national and European level.

The European Youth Forum calls for a stronger financial and structural embedding and better recognition of the structured dialogue at the European level. This should be realised in the scope of the new EU youth programme. The funding for the consultation processes in the different Member States should also be further developed in the new programme. The deadlines and conditions of the grants should be streamlined and adapted to the timing of the structured dialogue.

While the European Youth Forum believes that the political outcomes of the structured dialogue process should always be communicated to National Working Groups and that, to an extent, stakeholders must be left to take their own initiative in implementing the results of the process, these two measures alone are not sufficient to sustain the credibility of the process indefinitely: the structured dialogue will not be sustainable as a mere talking-shop producing political outcomes that have no real impact on young people or civil society.

- **The European Youth Forum advocates for improved follow-up after a complete cycle. There needs to be a clear commitment of decision-makers made towards the Structured Dialogue with timely regular concrete feedback and a clear visible follow-up at least after every cycle. The Team Presidency and the Commission should regularly communicate the follow-up actions they take to National Working Groups. The Working Groups should be closely associated with the EU Youth Report, as the main reporting tool foreseen within the open method of coordination. The EU Youth Report should continue to be prepared by the ministry responsible for youth affairs, and then discussed and approved with National Youth Councils within the National Working Group. This discussion should take place before the report is sent to the European Commission. The structured dialogue should be an integral part of this reporting and assessment exercise.**

## **IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AND THE VISIBILITY OF THE PROCESS**

### **Online visibility**

Communication and visibility are two aspects of the structured dialogue process, which have been slow to develop. Until now, establishing the working structures of the process has necessarily taken precedent. After the success of the initial cycle on youth employment, improving the efficiency of communication between European and national levels; disseminating information to young people as well as cross-sectorial stakeholders; and raising the visibility of the process are all of the utmost importance in reinforcing and building upon the political momentum and structures which have been put in place.

In line with the recommendations of European Youth Week 2011, the European Youth Forum's Member Organisations agree that online presence of the structured dialogue with young people is necessary. This presence should provide clear, transparent and easily accessible information and be translated wherever possible. A platform where

the National Working Groups could exchange ideas, best practices and results of their consultations should also be provided (potentially on the revamped European Youth Portal).

- **The Forum is currently taking measures to improve and restructure its structured dialogue page and calls for the strong presence of the process on the future European Youth Portal. The European Youth forum calls for the European Commission to foresee adequate budget for communication on Structured Dialogue.**

## **THE FUTURE OF THE STRUCTURED DIALOUGE**

The European Youth Forum will participate in the preparation of the EU Youth Report 2012 and engage the future Trio-Presidency (Ireland-Lithuania-Greece) in negotiations for a third structured dialogue cycle commencing on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2013.

- **The European Youth Forum advocates a third cycle of the structured dialogue, the overall priority of which should be jointly decided by young people, the future Trio-Presidency and the European Commission. This third cycle should exemplify progress in the follow-up and implementation of the structured dialogue process and include input from a newly established European Working Group during the consultation phases. The structured dialogue process should continue until at least the end of the EU Youth Strategy in 2018.**