

Reaction to the Commission Communication “An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering”

Based on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on “An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering; a renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities” (27 April 2009)

Introduction

Since the preparation and publication of the White Paper “A new impetus for European youth” in 2001, the European Youth Forum (YFJ) and its Member Organisations have consistently contributed to the subsequent related processes, in order to ensure that the voice of young people and youth organisations was heard and duly considered. In this context, a mid-term evaluation of the framework of European cooperation in the youth field and its main process, the Open Method of Coordination in the youth field (OMC), was undertaken by the YFJ. Through the different documents and reports produced—including a Policy Paper on the Future of EU Youth Policy Development (0116-06), two shadow reports on the implementation of the first, second and third priorities of the OMC, Information, Participation and Voluntary Activities (0401-06 and 0985-06) and the evaluation study of the OMC in 2006—the YFJ already expressed its vision, expectations and also disappointments regarding the current framework; and highlighted the improvements necessary to finally work genuinely on and with the transversal nature of youth policy. In order to contribute to the evaluation of the framework and the proposal for the new framework, the YFJ subsequently produced a shadow report on the evaluation of the current framework in the youth field (March 2009) and also adopted Key principles for the new framework at its General Assembly in November 2008.

The European Youth Forum welcomes the process of assessing the current framework in the field of youth and creating a new one. However, the YFJ observes with regret that the renewed Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to address youth challenges and opportunities, outlined in the Commission Communication, does not fully address the main concerns expressed by the YFJ throughout the past years.

The European Youth Forum observes with pleasure that the need to create a cross-sector approach to youth policy is the overarching element of the new framework. Youth organisations and young people have been calling for that for a long time. This approach is the only sustainable way to answer the needs of young people and give them the means to be active citizens and ensure their autonomy. Nevertheless, whilst doing a good analysis of those needs, the Communication fails to propose means of implementation and therefore to structure a vision. The ambition of the framework should be to enhance young people’s participation and living conditions and to create proper structures for a cross-sector approach to youth policy.

The YFJ agrees with the analysis in the Communication that the current framework has not been coordinated enough. The YFJ calls for clear objectives for EU-level cooperation. This means promoting good governance such as transparency, creating structures for the implementation of the cross-sector approach and limiting the number of objectives within the framework.

While welcoming some elements of the proposed new EU Strategy for Youth namely, introducing the cross-sector vision, renewal of the OMC method, and joint rapport from the Council and the Commission, the YFJ identifies the following main messages which should be strengthened and which it hopes the Council will take into account in its Council Resolution:

1. The Commission Communication does not address the shortcomings of the current framework

1.1. Need for effective implementation mechanisms.

Before the publishing of the Commission Communication, the YFJ repeatedly stressed the need to address the lack of effective implementation mechanisms within the former Framework of European Cooperation in the Youth field, both regarding the Open Method of Coordination and the horizontal youth policy. If the Communication does analyze the main challenges for young people today, it fails however to identify the mechanisms to ensure implementation. The analysis is therefore watered down as needs are not addressed. Again, the YFJ calls for the formulation of concrete objectives that reflect the level of participation and the living conditions of young people. The YFJ regrets that the need to link each field of action to a set of implementation tools—cross-sector mechanisms as well as instruments from the youth field's own "tool box" —has not been tackled in the Commission Communication.

1.2. Need for clear vision on how to deliver a cross-sector youth policy.

The YFJ welcomes the adoption of a cross-sector approach to youth policy as a guiding principle for the new framework of cooperation - the Communication is addressing most of the relevant processes in the different policy fields. However, a clear linkage to the European Youth Pact is missing and it should be put in place. This is an issue of growing importance when the year 2010 is just around the corner and the discussion of the next cycle of Lisbon Strategy has already started. There should be a clear political message sent that the European Youth Pact remains as one of the core mainstreaming tools how young people's needs are addressed in the relevant policy fields.

Still, even if the cross-sector approach is very welcome, the mechanisms and structures needed to achieve cross-sector cooperation on horizontal issues are not included in the Communication clearly and concretely, but can only be imagined from the two following proposals:

- "The Council could envisage setting-up cooperation between different Council formations";
- "The Commission will strengthen its internal coordination through inter-service groups".

The YFJ calls for effective mechanisms to be clearly defined, beyond these two proposals. Cross-sector approach to youth policy should always also include youth participation. All new structures and mechanisms must involve youth organisations. This should be clearly linked to the

development of the concept of structured dialogue to ensure its cross-sector nature.

1.3. The proposed framework needs to focus on objectives.

While the dual approach “Investing in Youth” and “Empowering Youth” is positive, the three overarching goals and the eight fields of actions are very broad, which is especially problematic given the absence of effective mechanisms for cross-sector cooperation and the vague definition of the process on how the OMC priorities and objectives will be reformed. While the eight fields of action are relevant to young people to reach autonomy, results can only be achieved through clear and measurable objectives. Therefore the YFJ calls for a more focused framework with less priorities and clearer objectives.

1.4. The proposed common objectives and actions in the eight fields of action should be less general

To give just two examples “Youth employment should remain a priority” (Field of Action 2—Employment) and the catch-all “objective” (Field of Action 4—Inclusion) are not precise. We believe that on social inclusion the main priorities should be to ensure accessibility to and inclusivity of education for all young people, to target all EU social funds on social integration for young people, as well as target structures that promote the creation of more and better jobs for young people and the non-discrimination of young people in the labour market. For each objective, the work should be focused on a specific goal, where EU cooperation has an additional value.

2. The Commission Communication fails in recognising and encouraging the constructive role of young people and their organisations.

2.1. The renewed framework instrumentalises youth policy for other purposes.

Linking the proposed Communication to the Renewed Social Agenda makes full sense. However, subordinating youth policies fully to this agenda and other EU objectives does not. Youth policy should remain a specific policy area in its own right. The YFJ has been defining what a youth policy is where the needs of young people are met (0590-06).

2.2. Participation as an overarching principle.

In the proposed Communication, the Commission formally acknowledges the role of young people as subjects and actors of youth policy. However, this vision is not followed through throughout the document. Participation is one of the fields of action, but does not seem to underpin the entire framework. Participation should be the underlying principle in all policy areas mentioned in the renewed OMC, and the OMC should not come across solely as a service for young people.

2.3. The Communication does not recognise the full role of an active young civil society and youth organisations.

While we welcomed the identified need to raise the quality of youth work, the YFJ regrets to see so little emphasis on young civil society and its crucial role in empowering young people. As we believe in the needs for quality and efficient trainings to provide young people with skills and

competences, we believe that youth organisations should get more recognition for their contribution. Young civil society is the voice of young people, expressing their challenges and needs as well as proposing solutions.

3. The Commission Communication does not outline a system of governance of the framework that ensures ownership by the EU Member States and youth organisations

3.1. Young people need progress on the development of the structured dialogue.

After several years of discussion and taking tentative steps towards a structured dialogue with youth, this Communication would have been an opportunity to outline a vision on how the dialogue should be organised as well as on how young people will be involved in the governance of the framework throughout the policy cycle. We believe that the working group to be set up in 2010 should not be the laboratory to develop a structured dialogue but more to implement and finally shape together the functioning of structured dialogue. The coherent mechanism that the YFJ calls for implies the involvement of young people and youth organisations throughout the policy cycle, across policy areas, and based on a broad bottom-up approach.

3.2. The role, priorities and objectives of the OMC must be defined together.

In addition, the role of the OMC within the framework, as the only formal coordination instrument in the youth field, is not clarified and therefore contributes to the vagueness of the implementation as well as the role of young people and youth organisations in the governance of the Framework and the OMC. A clear and transparent process for setting up the future priorities and objectives of the OMC should be defined together between all the stakeholders, including youth organisations.

3.3. The European Youth Forum does not understand why volunteering is not put higher on the agenda considering 2011 to be the European Year of Volunteering. We believe that implementing common priorities demands a holistic approach of all stakeholders, with all the tools available and should therefore use the framework fully.

3.4. The system of yearly priorities does not follow the presidency cycles.

Within the former framework, the system of yearly priorities of the Commission clashed with the agenda of the Presidencies, which cooperate in 18-month trios with joint priorities. The Communication would have been an opportunity to recognise this and propose 18-month cycles, with a strong involvement of the Team Presidencies. Instead, the Communication once again proposes one-year priorities for the structured dialogue cycle, which could generate incoherence in the future youth policy agendas. This could lead to the current situation where priorities are overlapping and therefore watered down.

4. Conclusion

The European Youth Forum welcomes the Commission Communication and especially its' effort to create a real cross-sector approach to youth policy in Europe, but sees that improvements in the

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implementation mechanisms and structures still need to be made in order to improve the participation and living conditions of young people in Europe. Failing to do so will have long term consequences for our societies in these challenging times when youth unemployment is skyrocketing and investing in youth is losing its' impetus with the excuse of the economic downturn. The YFJ is committed to continue working for strengthening youth policies in Europe, and sees the Member States and the European Commission as key allies in the process.