

Future of the EU Youth Strategy

Policy document on “Involving More Actors in the European Youth Strategy”

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Introduction

This paper summarises the key outcomes of a Focus Group on 'Involving More Actors in the EU Youth Strategy', conducted as part of the preparations for the Stakeholder Conference on the future of the EU Youth Strategy (EUYS). The Focus Group meeting, organised by the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture - DG EAC), took place in Brussels on the 7 March 2017 and involved participants coming from stakeholder organisations including national Youth Forums, the Youth research field and government representatives from Member States. This paper provides a brief overview of the policy context for the topics addressed in the Focus Group, a summary of the key points emerging from the discussions and, on this basis, provides some suggestions for potential topics for discussion on this theme at the EU Youth Strategy stakeholder conference.

Policy context

The mid-term evaluation¹ of the current EUYS shows that the strategy could have more impact if it were better known and understood by key stakeholders. Evaluation findings suggest that not all of the interviewed policymakers in the youth field were aware of the objectives and instruments of the EUYS, and the level of awareness was even lower among policymakers from other policy sectors. Only a small share of youth in the surveyed organisations reported having a good basic understanding of the EUYS. Similarly, only a small share of the surveyed young people were aware of the actions under the framework of the EUYS, whereas many more were aware of the EU programme for young people.

However, at the same time, the evaluation findings suggest that there is strong willingness among European Member States (MS) to continue their participation in cooperation activities in the framework of the EUYS over the next cycle of the 2016-2018 period. The sustained high interest in EU youth cooperation is shared among youth policymakers (i.e. the interviewed youth ministries), implementing bodies (i.e., National Agencies that implement the Erasmus+ youth chapter) and youth organisations (i.e. the interviewed national youth councils and EU federations of youth organisation).

Youth policy is decentralised in many EU countries. Hence, in order to involve more actors in EUYS the evaluation recommends that EUYS aims to achieve broader participation in EU activities on the part of local and regional youth policy makers. The EUYS should therefore set up mechanisms to allow local and regional level policy actors to participate in the youth cooperation framework. This could be achieved by:

- Involving municipal associations (via the networks of municipalities) in countries with a devolved approach to youth policy; e.g. in consultations, in reporting exercises, expert groups, peer learning events, etc.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/youth/sites/youth/files/youth-strategy-mobility-evaluation-2016_en.pdf

- Taking into account the needs of policymakers at local and regional levels when formulating the objectives and instruments of the new EUYS, e.g. via consultations (structured dialogue or other) at the local level, which could then be compiled at the national level;
- Encouraging MS to circulate information and opportunities related to cooperation at policy level to local and regional levels, beyond EU-supported multipliers (e.g. European Youth Portal, Eurodesks, national Erasmus+ agencies).

These insights from the evaluation of the current EUYS formed the basis of the discussion in the focus group.

Key points emerging from Focus Group discussions

How can increased involvement of new stakeholders, practitioners, researchers, etc., be encouraged in order to ensure a more inclusive youth policy cooperation?

Why 'new' stakeholders?

A key message from the focus group was that the issue for the EUYS should not be to include 'new' actors in the youth policy cooperation. The desired actors are already identified. Efforts should instead be focused on ensuring that existing actors have their voices heard at the EU level. It is more important to develop new actions that meet the needs of especially the local authorities and the local youth workers, than including 'new' stakeholders.

The right kind of youth?

The focus group highlighted some different characteristics of the existing composition of youth actors involved in the youth strategy. The youth participants in the European dialogue are usually highly committed youth, who are predominantly English speakers and have the required level of available resources to engage with the European structures. However, the 'forgotten middle class', who make up the bulk of the political segment for youth policy formulation, are less adequately represented at the political table. There is a clear underrepresentation of voices from the strategy's target segment, namely the troubled or disengaged youth. Securing a feedback mechanism to ensure that the opinions of this segment are properly heard within the EU political framework is important in order to enhance the strategy's legitimacy.

The need to engage decision makers

A distinctive feature of the activities surrounding the European Youth Strategy is that it tends to be overpopulated by youth actors and underpopulated by influential decision makers, e.g. politicians at national level, who do not perceive the EUYS to be interesting or relevant to their political influence.

There are instruments in place to mediate the political opinions and interests of young people, such as the structured dialogue options in which many young people are involved. However, according to the focus group participants, national politicians and other decision makers are not closely committed to these instruments. An effort to understand this lack of commitment from decision makers in the EUYS could be profitably for the further process of revising the EUYS.

Increasing the role of researchers in the EUYS

Researchers in youth-related matters could be more involved in the EUYS than they presently are. The collaboration with researchers could be facilitated through the use of some form of ***advisory boards in youth policy*** to make more of a challenge of the assumptions behind political decision makers or to act

as intermediaries for youth interest groups not properly represented in the policy process. If advisory boards of youth researchers are a viable option for the EUYS, then efforts should be made to avoid that the researchers have a political agenda rather than a scientific interest in the subject.

Better outreach

The national youth organisations could also have better outreach functions than they currently have at their disposal. This could be undertaken much more easily with informal 'bridges' rather than facilitating liaison activities through established or formal channels. Ministries and youth representatives could also be encouraged to increase the level of co-creation in policy formulation to shape and create the policy-/cross-sectoral vision of their youth policy. There also seems to be a tendency to distinguish between horizontal cooperation and vertical cooperation, when in fact the organisations involved could benefit from receiving contributions from both. Initiatives like the *Youth Wiki* could ensure an efficient instrument to support a cross-sectional policy-making process. The Youth Wiki could be expanded to include all youth policies across the EU as an information database, and different sections could be delegated to different actors, e.g., one section to youth organisations, one to youth ministries, etc.

How can we ensure that more inclusive youth policy cooperation reflects the decentralisation of youth policy?

A professional media strategy

Decentralisation of the youth policy is key to the success of the EUYS. One aspect that has not been explored yet is the role professional marketing agencies could play in informing the right target audience of the EUYS. More knowledge of instruments and results created by the strategy could help facilitate interest. The point was made that young people should be encouraged to use the European Youth Portal and that this could be achieved through professional marketing.

One channel that could be considered an opportunity is to use schools as marketing platforms to inform young people of their opportunities within the EU framework. The assessment of the focus group is that this would not be a plausible option, if formal agreements between the MS were to be pursued, since the national authorities are responsible for the content of national education policies. However, an option could be to pursue more informal agreements at local level with individual schools.

Ensuring room for policy interpretation by the MS

There seems to be a trend towards more countries decentralising their youth policies. Currently, the EUYS is not a collaboration of regions, but a collaboration between MS, and therefore it really follows this trend. The problem is the dilemma between the role of the EU acting as a legislator and the MS as national authorities. It is the focus group's opinion that the goal of the efforts under the EUYS should be to ensure a 'room' for local level interpretation of the EUYS. The modality or content of the EUYS is not something that is going to be turned into legislation as things stand right now. In that respect, 'supportive competences' is a good term. In order for the EUYS to make an impact, it must rely on its ability to support local level policies.

Inspiration from local/national level good practice

Another opportunity to ensure more inclusive youth policy cooperation could be to draw inspiration from initiatives created at the local level. One example of a rather successful youth initiative at the local level is the 'Young Voices'² initiative by the National Youth Council of Ireland, which has drawn investment support from the Erasmus+ programme. It is a space for young people and decision makers to discuss and feed into youth policy at national and European level together. Their statement 'Young people

² <http://www.youth.ie/youngvoices>

shaping a diverse, inclusive and connected Europe' should be indicative of the kind of initiatives that could be considered good opportunities for decentralisation and inclusion of the EUYS.

Accountability

The focus group found that a major barrier for an inclusive EUYS is the issue of accountability. Young people have limited political influence and cannot hold politicians accountable with their voting strategies. Moreover, if young people do not have a basic understanding of the instruments and possibilities within the EU, how can they hold the EU accountable for not delivering on the 'promises' included in the strategies?

Potential topics for further discussion

The following topics were discussed as possible points to cover at the EU Youth Strategy conference:

- Which mechanisms can be set up to ensure that national and local voices from the EUYS target segment are included in shaping the future of the strategy and implementing it?
- How can a stronger engagement of decision makers at national level be ensured in the EUYS?
- Could researchers play the role as intermediaries or brokers between youth at local level and the EUYS?

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