Future of the EU Youth Strategy
Policy document on “Youth participation: reform of the Structured Dialogue and beyond”

Framework Service Contract to Provide Expertise and Support for European Cooperation in Education, Training, Youth and Sport (EAC/07/2015)
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Introduction

This paper summarises the key outcomes of a focus group on “Youth participation: reform of the Structured Dialogue (SD) and beyond” conducted as part of the preparations for the Stakeholder Conference on the future of the EU Youth Strategy. The focus group, organised by the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture - DG EAC), took place in Brussels on 16th March and involved participants representing a range of stakeholder organisations including two national Ministry representatives, one representative from an Erasmus+ National Agency, one representative from a national Youth Authority, four representatives from European youth organisations, two representatives from the European Commission and two Ecorys experts. This paper provides a brief overview of the policy context for the topic 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 conference.

Policy context

The focus group discussions focused primarily on how to improve the outreach of the SD and how to achieve more feedback within the SD mechanisms, but also on the potential for synergies with Erasmus+, the Youth Conference and other instruments.

The ‘Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the EU’\(^1\) raised concerns regarding the outreach of the instrument in three different fields: target groups, as SD could not take due account of specific target groups, such as the ‘disadvantaged’ or the ‘very young’; topics covered, as it could be used as a broader consultation platform to support developments in non-youth specific policy fields by inviting relevant stakeholders at EU Youth Conferences; and geographical scope, especially difficulty to reach out to the local level.

According to the evaluation, both the SD and the EU Youth Conferences are examples of internal coherence within the EUYS. The EUYS’s main influence on EU initiatives has been via the outcomes of the SD on Council Resolutions, mainly in the employment and education agendas. However, there are challenges in turning joint recommendations and conclusions made at EU level into concrete initiatives at both the EU and national levels. Several stakeholders, for instance, mentioned that the value of the SD lay more in the skills it allowed participants to develop, than in its influence on policymaking at national or EU level.

Finally, regarding complementarities with other instruments, initiatives or policies, the evaluation suggested that the SD could be better linked to the European Youth Week activities and avoid duplication at national level with similar youth consultation instruments in member states such as Germany, France.

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or the UK. Erasmus+ projects could better ensure that the recommendations from the SD are fed back at the local level to young people and grassroots organisations involved in consultations and to the general public.

**Key points emerging from Focus Group discussions**

**How to improve the outreach of the SD**

The first reflection agreed upon by participants was that there is a need for a definition of what it means to improve the outreach of SD, since it could mean to simply increase the number of participants or to improve the quality of the discussions though engaging a wider range of young people. Overall, participants agreed that the quality of the discussion achieved by reaching different groups should be the priority. In contrast, it was noted by one participant that the outreach of the process in numerical terms was important in influencing ministers’ view of the process.

The use of the SD as a broader consultation platform to support developments in non-youth policy fields was discussed. Participants agreed that SD is a good instrument for policy observation and it is important to discuss EU policies among young people. In this sense, there is a need for more cross-sectoral cooperation and for clarification of the process and opportunities for involving other stakeholders. However, limitations were also highlighted with a perception amongst participants that SD is not flexible enough when it comes to including other stakeholders and it is a risk to the effectiveness of the process if the topics are too broad.

Several participants raised a concern that there was an absence of a clear definition of SD and its aims. There was perceived to be a lack of awareness amongst stakeholders as to the objectives of the SD and disagreement as to what kind of instrument it should be: an instrument to make changes at EU level or at local level. This lack of geographic definition and misperceptions of what SD is was felt to negatively affect the effectiveness of the SD.

Finally, participants agreed that more effort should be made in order to improve the outreach at both EU and local level, and they provided some ideas as to how this could be done: using champions to spread the word, such as those who have participated in SD directly, local governments and local organisations at a national level, and the Youth Ambassadors, at EU level; designing topics appealing to young people; improving media coverage using social media to show the positive aspects of the process; and linking finance to outreach so organisations can receive more funds if better outreach is demonstrated. On the latter point, a grant mechanism was suggested to which organisations can apply and receive more funds if better outreach and higher participant diversity are demonstrated, if the workings of the consultation process is made more transparent and if aims of the activity are closely aligned with the National Youth Strategy.

**How to achieve more feedback within the SD mechanism**

There was strong consensus amongst participants that feedback in the SD process was extremely important. This included a need for more follow up on the outcomes of the SD and the impact of the recommendations, and in particular direct feedback to young people. On the latter point, it was noted that young people who participate in SD need to know what the results of their participation are and whether their contributions were useful.

Some suggestions were made as to how to improve feedback: including a section on feedback in the reports that national working groups have to submit; being transparent in the feedback and publishing all
relevant documentation on the European Commission and Youth Forum websites and ensuring their accessibility.

Additionally, there was agreement amongst the focus group participants that feedback messages to young people should be simple and effective. However, the ability to do this is undermined by the fact that recommendations, which are the principle outcome of the SD process, are addressed to a wide range of stakeholders (Council of Ministers, European Commission, Member States at national, regional and local level, etc.).

This feedback issue was also discussed from a bottom up perspective, i.e. how young people and youth organisations can feed into SD. Recommendations in this regard were: fostering the participation of Ministries in SD and in particular in the working groups; using participatory tools, such as surveys, to collect information; proposing topics close to young people’s interests; organising focus groups with experts in every cycle; and reviewing the role of Youth Conferences and Working Groups in the feedback mechanisms.

**Could other EU participatory tools be used in a way that would be complementary to the SD?**

The third theme of the discussions was around what other participatory tools could complement SD. Erasmus+, and in particular Key Action 3 (KA3) Projects, have been quite successful in examining various aspects of SD, according to the focus group participants. Conferences where the Ambassadors participate are felt to be a valuable resource for SD. Also, the European Youth Week could be used to examine various aspects of SD and to share with National Working Groups coordinators. Additionally, cooperation with the IT sector and companies experienced in reaching young people was suggested as a complementary participatory tool.

Participants in the focus group were asked if they considered that the involvement of youth workers could be useful. For some experts, involvement of this group makes more sense at a national level, as they are the main stakeholders that implement the process. Another expert, however, suggested that youth workers could be useful in order to ensure diversity in the profile of young people who participate in SD at EU level by supporting attendance and participation at the Youth Conferences.

**Potential topics for further discussion**

The following topics emerged as possible points to cover at the conference:

- What more could be done to improve the outreach of SD both in terms of the number of young people involved and the quality of the discussions it facilitates?

- To what extent can and should SD be used as a broader consultation platform to support developments in non-youth policy fields?

- What other ways could be utilised to ensure a bottom up approach to gather young people’s opinions and to design relevant topics for SD?

- Is there a role for youth workers at an EU and national level in the SD process?
• How could SD be made more effective at both EU and national level? Should SD be focused on policy-making at European, or national level? Which stakeholders should be responsible of following up developments at each level?

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Annex One:
List of participants