

The Future of Europe: unleashing the potential of young people



Introduction

The European Union is at a crossroads and the only direction to take is the one where young people are included in its decisions and at the centre of its policies.

In the wake of the vote by the British people to leave the EU, we are facing multiple internal and external challenges that affect the unity of the Union: migration flows, security threats, climate change, economic disparities... The European Youth Forum believes that the European project, supported by a vast majority of young people, is the only viable path for a sustainable, social, prosperous and democratic Europe for the people and for our planet. But there is a future for the European Union only if it comes closer to its citizens.

Citizens lack control over their common future. When it comes to young people, we are not represented by the current political system and often excluded from decisions that affect us and future generations. Young people want to be part of Europe, though. We want a European Union that unleashes our potential, creates a promising future, and safeguards our fundamental human rights.

Currently, this is not the case. Young people are both systematically underrepresented in the political arena, and excluded from society, leading to lower levels of trust in the system and in institutions of representative democracy. Disengagement with the traditional political sphere can result in young people

moving towards populist, anti-democratic and xenophobic movements as well as, in exceptional cases, violent extremism in Europe. This move undermines social cohesion and the European project itself.

Several ideas have been put forward to address the future of the EU as well as young people's place in Europe. Proposals such as the European Solidarity Corps, the extension of the Youth Guarantee and an Interrail ticket for all 18 year olds are welcome contributions to the discussion. But such an approach, consisting of ad-hoc, top-down proposals, is far from the bottom-up and participatory vision that the European Union should be implementing. Young people do not need short-term, tokenistic initiatives but long-term solutions, developed with our input, and based on a comprehensive strategy for the sustainable development of Europe.

The following youth vision document puts forward the starting point on which to build such a Europe with and for young people, based on the following topics:

- **Sustainable Development**
 - **Democratic reform of the European Union**
 - **Employment and Social Rights**
 - **Education and Youth**
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Sustainable Development

The financial and economic crises, natural catastrophes, the exceptional number of people seeking refuge in Europe – the root causes of most crises facing Europe today – are long-term challenges of a global scale. The only way to prevent these crises from happening again and again is to work towards truly sustainable development in Europe and beyond. In 2015, the European Union was instrumental in ensuring the agreement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It must now play a leading role in implementing the Agenda in a comprehensive way that recognises the links between different policy areas and places social and environmental issues on equal footing with the economy.

Today's economic and political system does not work for our planet or for people, especially young people. Current and previous generations have put young people's future at risk through unsustainable practices that have little regard for future consequences. The EU must move towards sustainable development to ensure the rights and well-being of young and future generations within and outside its borders. The 2030 Agenda provides the opportunity to address the challenges Europe is facing in an integrated and long-term manner, together with European citizens, but it is up to the European Union to put in place a strategy that will make use of this opportunity.

We call on the European Union and its Member States to:

- Ensure concerted, coherent and ambitious implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Goals at EU and national levels, across internal policies and in cooperation with countries outside the EU. This is key to bringing a positive, durable change to Europe's economic, environmental and social situation.
- Ensure that all policy areas are coherent with the principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and contribute to the achievement of socially, environmentally and economically sustainable development.
- Place democratic reform of the EU, employment and social affairs, and education and youth at the heart of the EU's efforts to achieve sustainable development, while ensuring coherence with environmental sustainability, sustainable consumption and production, the urgent need to combat climate change, and long-term vision, rather than quick fixes.





Democratic Reform of the European Union

In order to reconnect with its citizens, the EU and national politics have to become more accessible and open to bottom-up change. A particular focus should be put on the participation of all young people, who are often less likely to vote, because they do not feel represented by the political leadership.

We call on the European Union and its Member States to:

- Implement quality citizenship education with a European dimension in curricula and promote a culture of participation inside schools (for example, through specific projects or school councils) and outside schools (for example, through youth organisations). This would foster political and civic participation from the earliest age.
- Support and recognise youth organisations as key providers of citizenship education and encourage more partnerships between formal and non-formal education providers
- Provide young people with the right to vote from the age of 16 onwards, from the local to European level.

At the same time, political systems, in particular at the EU level, have to become more transparent and open in their governance.

Therefore, we call on the European Union and its Member States to:

- Better involve civil society in policy-making and up-scaling civic dialogue, such as the Structured Dialogue with Young People. It is crucial that the EU is truly transparent, democratic and accountable in all its decision-making processes.
- Reform the European Citizens' Initiative to make it a more flexible and accessible tool, enabling debate and dialogue between civil society and the EU.

Employment and Social Affairs

Quality jobs and the Youth Guarantee

Europe will only thrive if all young people have access to quality jobs. Young people cannot become independent, active citizens if they do not have access to employment. Currently, nearly 1 in 5 young people are out of work – with huge economic and social costs for European states, now and in the future. The European Youth Forum fully believes in the potential of the Youth Guarantee in being one key step to addressing this problem – if implemented well. But building partnerships, changing mentalities and developing the structural changes which are necessary take time and continued investment.

We call on the European Union and its Member States to:

- Invest in quality job creation
- Support young entrepreneurs through reducing administrative, financial and social barriers to setting up a business
- In the framework of negotiations on the mid-term revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), ensure at least the same amount of funding as there is currently for the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) for 2017–2020 – meaning 3.2 billion euros per year (European Social Fund dedicated funding and YEI combined)

- Ensure that the Youth Employment Initiative receives continued funding in the next MFF so that it becomes a long term, sustainable and preventative measure for youth unemployment.

Social Rights

1 in 5 young people today are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. European welfare systems are not only failing to protect young people, but are also contributing to the multiple discrimination young people face in all areas of life. ‘Youth’ minimum wages are in place in 8 EU countries, disproportionate amounts of young people are in precarious employment, unpaid internships are still rife, and social protection is inaccessible to young people under a certain age. It is clear that welfare systems are out of date and incompatible with the current realities and challenges faced by young people. This situation needs to be urgently addressed both to ensure the survival of the European social model and to ensure that the European project keeps young people on its side.

The European Pillar on Social Rights is an opportunity to change this reality. Proposals and actions on the future of Europe must integrate the Pillar and its initiatives and ensure social rights are a reality for everyone – so that the EU can achieve its ‘social AAA rating’ and become inclusive of all.

We call on the European Union and its Member States to:

- Abolish discriminatory ‘youth’ minimum wages
- Agree on a Directive on fair working conditions for all forms of employment, ensuring for every worker a core set of enforceable rights
- Unblock negotiations on the Equal Treatment Directive to combat multiple discrimination in access to social protection and social services
- Ensure decent working conditions for internships, traineeships and apprenticeships, prohibiting those that are unpaid
- Modernise social security systems to adapt them to job-starters’ reality and to the proliferation of non-standard forms of employment, and ensure young people of all ages and in all situations have access to necessary social protection and services
- Agree on a Directive on Adequate Minimum Income Schemes
- Promote an independence supporting approach to housing policies and early intervention to fight homelessness
- Ensure universal, free access to healthcare, free from discrimination on any grounds
- Ensure better coordination between European social security systems



Education and Youth

! Quality and inclusive education

The right to education is enshrined in several legal instruments at both the European and the global level. It is an objective at the heart of not only the European social model, but also in the vision of global economic and social progress towards inclusive growth and a society that leaves no one behind. However, austerity measures as a response to the economic and financial crisis have seen cuts to education budgets with a clear impact on the quality of education, as well as on the accessibility of education particularly by those in disadvantaged situations.

We call on the European Union and its Member States to:

- Promote access to affordable quality services in education to address inequalities and challenges faced by disadvantaged youth in Europe
- Invest in education and ensure publicly funded individualised support as well as social support for more vulnerable groups of youth

! Erasmus +

Youth organisations contribute to personal, social, political and economic development of youth and their communities and can help

tackle the key challenges facing Europe. But the social value of youth organisations is currently hindered by a lack of investment, and by the slow implementation at national level of effective and all-encompassing (ie. including non-formal education and informal learning) validation systems. Validation should be seen as an investment as, if widely practiced and embraced by all stakeholders, it can lead to lifelong learning societies.

More support and recognition of the role of youth organisations in building more inclusive and democratic societies in Europe is necessary to reinforce cohesive and inclusive societies. The Erasmus+ programme is the major funding mechanism of the European Union supporting the mobility of young people for studying, volunteering and working abroad. Youth organisations are among the main stakeholders of the Programme. The youth sector represents only 10% of the overall Erasmus+ budget but it mobilises more than 25% of all the Programme's participants.

The European education, training and youth programme, however, accounts for only 1.35% of the current Multiannual Financial Framework. Erasmus+ is not able to respond to increasing demands of mobility of young people across Europe. The revision of the current MFF is the opportunity to address this issue and to mainstream youth issues in the EU budget.

We call on the European Union and its Members States to:

- Bring up to at least 3% of the current MFF the level of investment in education, training and youth programme.
- Allocate the proposed 200 million euros increase in Erasmus+ in the framework of the MFF review to the youth sector, as it is the one with the highest demand in the Erasmus+ Programme.
- Involve as much as possible youth organisations in the Erasmus+ mid-term evaluation reports at the national and European level, and in the development of the future education, training and youth programme.

! European Solidarity Corps

The European Solidarity Corps has the potential to offer young people a unique opportunity to volunteer and to gather experiences, acquire knowledge and develop their skills. The European Commission should build the initiative on the work already done by civil society, and to ensure that volunteer organisations are included in its design. Moreover, the implementation of the initiative should not undermine the budgets already allocated to other programmes.

We call on the European Union and its Members States to:

- Give the European Solidarity Corps a dedicated legal base and funding line so it does not draw resources from other initiatives for young people
- Design the initiative in close cooperation with youth organisations and other civil society organisations
- Avoid duplication of existing initiatives by civil society or other public authorities
- Include support to the structures that are contributing to the implementation of the initiative
- Ensure adequate training for participants from the beginning
- Validate the skills gained during volunteer experience with the European Solidarity Corps.

