



Paving the way for a meaningful EU Year of Youth 2022

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As the pandemic eases, the EU has decided to dedicate 2022 to young people. But this opportunity should not aim at recycling policies and interventions that have not worked pre-pandemic as they will definitively not fit for purpose in the post COVID-19 era. There is a need for age-sensitive tailored policies developed for and with young people.

This policy paper recommends concrete actions that the EU could take, as of 2022, to help young people navigate this crisis.

PREVENTING ANOTHER 'LOST-GENERATION'

Economic rights and opportunities

The fact that young people are more affected by economic recessions than other age groups should not come as a surprise. Not only do today's youth constitute a large share of new jobseekers, they are also cheaper to fire, and more likely to be subject to precarious forms of employment like part-time or temporary contracts. But this recession has also been particularly acute given the overrepresentation of young people in hard-hit sectors such as hospitality,

leisure, and retail. Furthermore, many young workers have been excluded from receiving jobless benefits and certain COVID-19 assistances.

It was estimated that between 2019 and 2020, globally, young people between the ages of 15 and 24 experienced an employment loss of 8.7%, compared with 3.7% for adults.¹ During the pandemic, employment loss mainly translated into a higher inactivity rate, which explains why a higher unemployment rate only offers a partial insight into the impact of the economic recession. The NEET category, or young people Not in Employment, Education or Training, has spread as a key indicator of young people's economic vulnerabilities over the last 20 years, because it encapsulates a broader definition of young people who are not accumulating human capital through formal channels. In 2019, the rate of NEETs reached its lowest point in a decade with 16.4% of the aged 20-34, but this increased to 17.6% in 2020.² Because they lost access to jobs, education and training, NEETs are more likely to be affected by social exclusion, poverty, mental health problems and financial insecurity about their future. According to the European Youth Forum, nearly half of young people who are NEETs are not aware of government available support measures for them. Moreover, they often feel the need to give up on

career aspirations by accepting poor employment conditions in order to have financial security.³

Disruption of social and human capital accumulation

Labour market statistics alone do not capture the full and diverse impact that the pandemic had on young people. COVID-19 mitigation measures, such as physical distancing, lockdowns, telework, or remote learning, prevented people from meeting their peers, attending events and strengthening their social capital.

Lockdowns translated in an abrupt shift from on-site teaching to online classes which, in many cases, had deep consequences as it disrupted young people in their human capital accumulation and their psychological development. It also exacerbated pre-existing socioeconomic disparities as schools with a more disadvantaged student population suffered more learning losses. As the pandemic progressed, students' surveys have shown that young people believe they and their educational institutions have adjusted well to online learning and that the situation has improved. In the longer-term, however, younger generations may be penalised in life-long learning compared with generations who entered before them, or who will enter after them in the labour market, notwithstanding the limitations to all the social activities which would surely affect their social capital and interpersonal skills.

Mental health and life satisfaction

Covid or no covid, mental health has always been a concern. In 2016, 1 out of 6 people across the EU, or 84 million people, were facing a mental health issue according to an OECD study.⁴ At that time, the financial cost of mental health exceeded 4% of EU-28 GDP due to losses in productivity, absenteeism, and loss of employment. Lockdown and social isolation, in combination with worsening economic conditions, have been associated with an increased level of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, loneliness, insomnia or depression. Sometimes referred to as the 'silent' or 'second'

pandemic, the growing burden on mental health affects all ages but the youth have been hit disproportionately. Nearly two-thirds of young people have declared being affected by mental health and wellbeing issues during the pandemic.⁵ Older groups did not experience the same incidence of low mental wellbeing because of young people's increased exposure to socioeconomic fallout as evoked above.

Health inequalities are predominantly a reflection of income disparities and poor environmental conditions for vulnerable groups. Young people belonging to specific social groups, such as health and care workers, lower income-groups, people with pre-existing mental health problems, new mothers, or LGBTI, were more likely to develop chronic depression and anxiety.⁶ Despite an increasing demand for mental health services and community-based support, their access and availability fell dramatically during the COVID-19 crisis, notably due to an inadequate shift to online appointments. In addition, the postponement of non-covid care generated a massive source of mental distress.

THREE POLICY POINTERS FOR A MEANINGFUL EU YEAR OF YOUTH

By hampering young people's projects and aspirations, the COVID-19 pandemic might have denied the traditional opportunities and starting points that previous generations enjoyed. For many, the start of their working life has been delayed, which risks postponing other phases of life such as parenthood, home ownership or pension adequacy. While young people are at the centre of the green and digital 'twin' transition, they will badly need an economic and social environment to maximise their chances of success. Youth is a national policy area. Yet, the EU can support and complement the action of Member States through coordination but also with very concrete programmes as evidenced in the past with the Erasmus+ programme. It is time for the EU to trigger some levers of action, as of 2022,

to ensure that the ‘Year of Youth’ stamp does not become empty words.

Setting a framework on quality traineeships

The Youth Guarantee, a Council recommendation which guarantees all young people (15-24) to receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education, has been the most central response to high levels of youth unemployment following the 2008-2009 financial crisis. While the Youth Guarantee promotes traineeships as an important entry point in the labour market for young people across Europe, we are seeing a growing number of abuses of the traineeship system. From insufficient learning content to inadequate working conditions and little or no remuneration, these abuses have detrimental impacts on young workers’ rights, skills’ development and living conditions.⁷ The most recent development occurred on 16 February 2022 when the European Committee of Social Rights concluded that Belgium had violated the European Social Charter with regard to ‘bogus internships’ in a country where only 18% of interns are paid.⁸

The EU civil society organisations and trade unions have repeatedly identified the lack of quality offers and the poor outreach for those young people who have the greatest difficulty to enter the labour market as the two main shortcomings of this scheme.⁹ In 2020, the Council revamped the Youth Guarantee, notably by extending its coverage to young people under 30.¹⁰ When it comes to traineeships, article 19 of the reinforced Youth Guarantee ensures that traineeship offers adhere to the minimum standards laid out in the Quality Framework for Traineeships.¹¹ Unfortunately, it simply does not go far enough to prevent trainees’ precariousness in the labour market. The Youth Guarantee must end up in positive, long-term outcomes for young people rather than offering low or unpaid temporary positions with low prospects of

being translated into a sustainable exit from unemployment. To do so, binding quality standards must be ensured, and unpaid traineeships must be banned. Having regard to article 153 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the European Commission should:

1. Propose a legal instrument with well-defined and tightly regulated quality standards for traineeships which establishes clear boundaries with respect to regular employment relationships. Under this protective regulation, financial support and social security coverage should be encouraged to prevent the perpetuation of social inequalities and precarious work.

A research-knowledge nexus on mental health

The long-time effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on mental health are unlikely to recover as quickly as the economy and the labour market will. Although the EU institutions have established a network to discuss mental health practices and fund research and practice in this area, there is no comprehensive EU plan to address this problem. A July 2020 European Parliament resolution recognized mental health as a fundamental human right and called the EU Commission to develop such comprehensive EU framework on mental health.¹²

The added value of a European mental health framework is twofold. First, some Member States are struggling to respond to mental healthcare needs because they are misreporting and under-reporting mental illness. As pointed out by the International Labour Organization, the EU lacks reliable data and monitoring about mental health, and especially with regard to the situation faced by young people, which makes comparison and upward convergence difficult.¹³ By tapping the economies of scale of research and knowledge organised at EU level as well as setting a surveillance system, the EU has the capacity to overcome the widespread scarcity and fuzziness of up-to-date data.

Second, mental health is by definition a transversal and multisectoral issue since it is largely shaped by social, economic and environmental factors. In this sense, lessons can be drawn from the holistic and comprehensive approach developed by the UK government in its COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan.¹⁴ Besides matching needs with tangible resources, this action plan addresses the broader determinants of mental health; from financial security and employment, to housing and access to essential services. In addition, the approach is tailored to vulnerable groups, with a particular focus on children and youth. A multisectoral approach is a key element that must be reflected in an EU framework, seeking synergies with existing instruments and funding such as the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) or the EU4Health programme. In more concrete terms:

2. There is a need for a 2022-2027 EU action plan on mental health framed in a transversal and multisectoral perspective. This framework would serve as a baseline scenario on mental health and wellbeing, capable of demonstrating the broader impact of pandemic recovery policies beyond strict economic factors, as well as preventing and managing more efficiently poor mental health that disproportionately affects the youth in Europe.

Putting youth in the spotlight

Although younger generations have been disproportionately affected by the adverse impact of the COVID-19 epidemic, they express slightly higher levels of trust in national and European institutions than the average population. Nonetheless, studies confirm that young people feel disconnected from and unsupported by public institutions and want to play a more active role.¹⁵

Since the 2001 White Paper on Youth, the EU has aimed at actively engaging young people in the

development, implementation and evaluation of all policies affecting the lives of young people. Yet, in recent years, the European Union has not always lived up to its ambitions when it comes to youth participation in the EU democratic life. On the one hand, young people have played a pivotal role in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) where each of the European Citizen Panels were made of 30% of 16-25 year-olds. Simultaneously, an EU Youth Coordinator was appointed to raise up key messages shared by young people inside the Commission. On the other hand, Next Generation EU, the biggest stimulus package to boost the post-COVID-19 recovery, vaguely identified young people's concerns in its targets and overlooked their involvement in its adoption process.¹⁶ According to a European Parliament study, only 7 out of 22 Member States involved youth organisations in the elaboration of their NRRPs.¹⁷

There is a risk of encouraging youth participation as a token where young people are seen as privileged actors in forums for reflection with uncertain outcomes, like the CoFoE, while being vaguely consulted at European and national levels on concrete programmes such as the recovery strategy. No remedies can be credibly designed and implemented without giving young people a meaningful say in determining their future and the future of the European Union. To achieve its full potential, the outcomes of youth participation must be clarified to create a sense of ownership and accountability. Consequently:

3. To ensure age sensitivity and age diversity in public consultations and policy outcomes, existing youth participation's platforms and programmes must be completed with a structured youth participation mechanism which would be developed throughout the policy cycle. This structured mechanism could be organised within the framework of the European Parliament, or as part of what will become of the CoFoE legacy.

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Endnotes

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