

CSO-LA Consultation in the framework of the Policy Forum on Development on the Youth Action Plan - involving young people in EU external action

Online global meeting
16 November 2021

Executive Summary

The European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) are preparing a Youth Action Plan (YAP) in the EU external action for the period 2022-2027, which is expected to be adopted as a Joint Communication in September 2022. To collect the views and input from relevant stakeholders to feed into the YAP, the European Commission conducted a targeted consultation including several actions involving global and regional youth organisations and civil society working with youth, members of the Policy Forum on Development, EU Member States, relevant UN agencies and other multilateral organisations, Youth Sounding Board for International Partnerships and other youth networks. The meeting with the members of the Policy Forum on Development and global and regional youth organisations and civil society organisations working with youth was organised in the framework of the targeted consultation and complementary to the online survey and other meetings with key stakeholders.

Participants delivered the following key messages in response to discussion questions:

1. What could be considered a successful Youth Action Plan? What would you like to see accomplished by 2027?

- The **meaningful participation** of youth, avoiding a tokenistic approach and allowing youth a real input into policy and decision making, recognising their capacity to provide input on a broad range of issues. Youth should be seen as partners and not beneficiaries.
- Youth issues and perspectives should be **mainstreamed** into all themes/areas of work, not only in those considered youth specific.
- An **inclusive** Plan covering wide age brackets (i.e. children and adolescents); those who are marginalised (i.e. persons with disabilities, migrants, LGBTQI+) and in vulnerable situations; and represent a diversity of backgrounds and geographical locations.
- Successful implementation includes, in addition to participation: **dedicated funding**; clear objectives and **monitoring mechanisms** (including goals, performance indicators and gender and age sensitive data collection); governance structures to oversee implementation; and regular, transparent, and accessible communication. Youth should be engaged in the monitoring and evaluation process.
- A comprehensive youth action plan will include not only youth participation in political decision making, but also youth entrepreneurship and employment, and culture and sports aspects.

2. Based on your experience, what are the main challenges for meaningful youth participation? In addressing those challenges, where would the EU action have the biggest impact in strengthening youth participation and empowerment?

- The EU must **promote youth participation** in its own decision-making spaces and champion youth participation in partner countries to counter low youth representation and political experience/expertise (which leads to a lack of confidence in political processes and decreased political engagement).
- The EU should **invest in education** as well as in the capacity building of youth organisations to enable youth to better understand, engage with and influence political systems. The EU could further create networks of youth organisations for peer-to-peer learning and promote mentorship schemes.
- The EU can impact youth empowerment by **supporting youth-led activities**, including administrative and sustainable financial support, capacity building, and knowledge sharing. Specifically support in navigating funding processes and financially supporting youth organisations were requested.
- The EU must support an **enabling digital environment**, as connectivity and “digital poverty” especially in rural areas are a major challenge.
- The EU can continue to **fight socio-economic barriers and inequality** by supporting the development of employment skills, providing natural and financial resources, and continuing its work toward the SDGs.

3. Which should be the thematic priority areas of the Youth Action Plan? How could the areas of intervention be linked to an overarching approach/framework/narrative?

- **Engage youth into political life** and decision-making, giving youth, including children and adolescents, a stronger voice on key issues of concern such as **climate change, gender equality, education and quality jobs and social protection** for youth.
- **Support formal and non-formal education.** Schools are important as safe spaces, shelters from violence, tools to reduce child labour and in providing access to food.
- **Link to the peace and security agenda** to ensure, for example, that youth are engaged in peace building (to reduce their vulnerability to violence) and that the impacts of livelihoods on youth migration are addressed.
- Adopt the Sustainable Development Goals as a strong global framework for the youth action plan, including to **Address vulnerable** children and **youth's needs** (i.e., migrants, LGBTQI+, youth with disabilities) and **promote gender equality** can be supported via.
- Implement a **multi-layered approach** to address the different needs, geographical and social context specificities, and in the different thematic areas.
- **Work via existing institutions**, such as the **youth focal points and EU Delegations, local governments and civil society organisations** which are closest to the youth on the ground and understand their needs.

Detailed report

I. Introduction and methodology

Marlene Holzner (Head of Unit of LAs, CSOs and Foundations, G2 at DG INTPA) welcomed participants to this first thematic consultation on youth that is meant as an opportunity to provide input towards the drafting of the Youth Action Plan (YAP) at the very beginning of the process.

A video message was then delivered by **Commissioner Urpilainen**, who reminded participants that as a former youth activist and teacher, she placed empowering youth at the heart of her mandate. To this end, a Youth Sounding Board was created for young people to be able to influence critical decisions within the International Partnerships Directorate (DG INTPA), and Bitania Lulu Berhanu from Ethiopia was appointed as a special advisor on youth to the Commissioner. The Commissioner assured participants that the YAP will take youth participation a step further and place youth at the heart of EU's international partnerships.

The planning process for the development of the YAP was presented by **Ana Torres Fraile** and **Viviana Galli** from the Youth Team of INTPA.G.3 (Youth, Education and Culture). Their presentation (part II below) was followed by a plenary session of clarifying questions, before participants broke into three groups (part III below), all of which discussed the same three guiding questions, and reported back to plenary before closing.

II. Presentation of the Youth Action Plan planning process

Ms Torres discussed the framework in which the YAP was being developed, including the substantial youth population in continents such as Africa, where three quarters of the population is below 35 years of age, and the specific challenges faced by youth: inequalities, unemployment, climate change, access to SRHR, conflict and instability and shrinking space for civil society. This situation has been worsened by the pandemic. The YAP will address youth not only as beneficiaries, but also as partners and actors in facing these challenges, taking a human rights-based approach. Ms Torres clarified that the EU already has a focus on youth in its internal policies. Youth participation in democratic processes is enshrined in EU treaties and the EU Youth Strategy provides a framework, very oriented to the EU; the YAP will need to be aligned to these. In addition, it will align with policies such as the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. The Council Conclusions of June 2020 of youth in external action stressed the importance of centring youth in external action, including foreign policy and public diplomacy, and the key role to be played by youth in delivering Agenda 2030 and the European Consensus on Development.

Ms Torres then presented the planned framework and coverage of the YAP, which will take the form of a Joint communication of the EC and EEAS, expected in September 2022. The plan will cover the 2022-2027 period, in alignment with the Multi annual Financial Framework (MFF). It will cover actions by the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), the Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) and the EEAS as well as those of DG INTPA. In terms of the geographic scope, it will cover all regions and all different levels – local, national, regional, global, with a focus on youth participation and empowerment. The thematic areas are yet to be defined through consultation, but will likely cover education, employment, peace and security and climate change among others. The YAP will not come with a specific budget allocation – implementation will be covered by existing geographic and thematic funding.

Ms Galli stressed that this consultation was part of a targeted consultation organised by DG INTPA with a variety of stakeholders: Policy Forum on Development members, global and regional youth organizations and civil society organizations working with youth, EU member states, UN and multilateral

agencies, EU youth networks or platforms and the Youth Sounding Board for International Partnerships. She also reminded participants to complete the online survey on this topic which was open until 28 November.

Participants were then invited to ask any **clarifying questions**. They asked about the financing of YAP possible activities and if the NDICI guidelines will include a specific focus on supporting youth, youth-led projects, for youth; and about taking regional cultural and linguistic diversity into consideration when programming.

Ms Torres clarified that the programming process was ongoing and that the youth participation priority is already being taken into account in this process even if the plan is not yet finalised. With regards to global initiatives, there is an intention to have limited funding for pilot initiatives, which will consider the youth dimension. She further stressed that the Youth Sounding Board provides advice on youth participation to the whole DG INTPA, which will be hopefully translated into actions involving youth more and more in the following years. In addition, DG INTPA and EEAS asked delegations to nominate youth focal points in each EU delegation to strengthen the youth focus at country level. Ms Galli stressed that the YAP will be a comprehensive policy framework which will need to be operationalised at different levels (local, national, regional, global). This means that there will be space for consultation with delegations at national level to adapt the recommendations to local specificities later on. She stated that if there is interest from PFD members and the other participants to the meeting, a space to discuss this draft outcomes of the targeted consultation could be organised in 2022. She further stressed that the operationalisation of the YAP will involve young people and youth networks as well.

III. Main aspects reported from the group discussions.

The meeting then moved to **group moderated discussions**, with participants divided into three breakout groups and asked to provide input on key discussion questions, as outlined below.

1. *What could be considered a successful Youth Action Plan? What would you like to see accomplished by 2027?*

Participants stressed that a successful YAP would:

- Adopt a comprehensive vision of youth, including comprehensive age brackets to also consider the perspectives of children and adolescents, which would help build a culture of participation from a young age. It should bring a diversity of actors from different fields and regions, including youth from vulnerable groups such as those with disabilities.
- By 2027, participants would like to see meaningful engagement of youth in policy processes, with the EU setting the example for others on how to do this. Prioritising topics that concern them, such as the domains of politics, entrepreneurship and employment and culture and sport, but also mainstreaming youth across policy areas, avoiding a tokenistic approach and allowing youth a real input into policy and decision making.
- By 2027, participants would like to see the YAP as a tool which has helped mainstream youth concerns into all domains of public policy with the EU performing age-sensitivity analysis when designing policy.

- Youth participation in EU external action should be increased by this date. This would require the accessibility and transparency of policy documents and spaces through measures such as avoiding technical jargon and creating common spaces for decision makers and youth.
- A key aspect to ensuring youth participation is securing their means for political engagement and participation in decision making, such as being economically empowered and having safe spaces. This should be reflected in funding for youth-led activities. In addition, support for volunteering, youth activities and youth-work is crucial.
- The YAP should also address the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as youth's role in peace and security.
- Participants called for setting clear objectives and indicators and engaging youth in the monitoring and evaluation process. This means monitoring implementation via concrete goals and age sensitive data collection, with clear key performance indicators (KPIs), clarity of the governance process and feedback on implementation of the YAP.

2. Based on your experience, what are the main challenges for meaningful youth participation? In addressing those challenges, where would the EU action have the biggest impact in strengthening youth participation and empowerment?

Some of the challenges discussed included representation, youth's lack of political practice and understanding of the systems of governance and general lack of confidence in political leaders. There is also lack of a network and connections, as well as skills, in a context of digital poverty. Lack of funding for youth organisations is also a challenge. Ageism and negative narratives about youth is also a problem. In general, youth are seen as beneficiaries rather than partners or alternatively, as a threat.

To make a difference, participants suggested the EU would have the biggest impact¹:

- Promoting civic education about democratic processes and how to engage with them.
- Supporting youth engagement in local governance and the political life of their communities
- Supporting access to natural and financial resources for youth (land, water, credit, etc.).
- Promoting youth-favourable legislation and against age discrimination.
- Pushing for partner countries to jointly commit to promoting youth participation and empowerment.
- Supporting existing youth engagement initiatives, such as a dialogue between youth organisations, local authorities and central governments, in a sustainable, long-term manner.
- Creating and supporting regular youth-led multilateral spaces for youth to discuss, build solidarity with each other and find a role for themselves; and platforms for youth organisations from different countries and continents to network, exchange experiences and engage in peer learning.
- Collecting data on youth, including clear indicators on reducing the challenges facing youth such as school dropout rates, youth unemployment and under-employment, as well as technical and vocational education and training and volunteering.
- Sharing information and knowledge through youth-friendly materials.

¹ Please note that the list does not reflect any order of importance or level of consensus among participants.

- Ensuring youth have access to digital tools and skills, as well as equipment and infrastructure such as a stable internet and electricity.
- Ensuring gender sensitivity and supporting youth organisations and networks of those most marginalised: girls and women, racialised youth, LGBTQI+ communities.

The support of the EU could come in the form of championing youth participation and facilitating change in partner countries, with EU delegations and youth focal points being particularly proactive on these topics. The EU could also champion the adoption of youth-oriented policies and youth inclusion in decision making in partner countries, at local, national and regional levels. In addition, the EU should fight against socio-economic barriers and inequalities, promote the economic and digital empowerment of youth and push back against legal and cultural barriers.

3. Which should be the thematic priority areas of the Youth Action Plan? How could the areas of intervention be linked to an overarching approach/framework/narrative?

Participants indicated that priorities of the YAP should be aligned with those in other EU strategies, in particular Gender Action Plan (GAP III) and plans addressing climate change. The priority thematic areas raised included: youth in politics; connecting youth with decision makers and each other, creating activist networks; gender equality; formal and informal education, with schools being shelters from violence and safe spaces; smoother transition to the labour market, including quality jobs and ending with child labour; social protection for young people; and peer to peer learning and collaboration to address the challenges of the future.

In terms of an overarching approach, existing infrastructure and institutions should be used to work closely with CSOs and LAs to address the needs on the ground. Participants stressed the need for a multilayer approach which considers youth and children in their environment.

Other priority areas mentioned included the SDGs, climate change, economic opportunities, peace and security, migration, inclusivity, vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQI+ community; data and technology.

The meeting was closed by **Agata Sobiech** (Head of Sector, Youth at DG INTPA.G3), who thanked participants for their contributions. While assuring participants that all of their contributions would be taken into account, she outlined some key take-aways: the need for youth to be involved in issues other than only those seen as strictly concerning them, including at the evaluation stage; taking into account differences between groups, their different needs and opportunities; inclusion, exclusion and vulnerabilities, which result in different needs; creating spaces and facilitating dialogue for cooperation between different actors; capacity building for youth and youth organisations; and accountability of the YAP through monitoring and follow up.