



30 November 2021
online meeting

13:00 - 15:30
(Brussels time)



Youth Action Plan (YAP): Involving young people in EU external action

Consultation meeting with youth networks

Introduction

The European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) are preparing a Youth Action Plan (YAP) in the European Union (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 inputs from relevant stakeholders to feed into the YAP, the EC ran a targeted consultation process, including meetings and an online survey, involving global and regional youth networks and civil society organisations working with youth, members of the Policy Forum on Development, EU Member States, relevant UN agencies and other multilateral organisations, the Youth Sounding Board for International Partnerships, and other youth networks.

The online meeting on November 30th was organised in the framework of this targeted consultation. The meeting brought together 24 representatives from the Youth Sounding Board for International Partnerships (YSB), the European Development Days (EDDs) Young Leaders Programme, the Young European Ambassadors, the U-Report Youth Ambassadors and the AU-EU Youth Cooperation Hub. Bitania Lulu Berhanu, Special Adviser on Youth to the Commissioner for International Partnerships, participated in the exchanges and shared some concluding remarks.

During the meeting, staff members of the EC's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) presented the YAP and the consultation process. Participants then took part in two simultaneous facilitated small-group discussions. The guiding questions and the outcomes of the discussions are detailed below.

How would you define a successful EU Youth Action Plan in External Action? What would you like to see accomplished by 2027?

When picturing what would make a successful YAP, the members of the youth networks focused on the following points:

- **the YAP as a tool for more meaningful youth participation;**
- **the need for more diverse and structured consultation processes;**
- **the importance of inclusion;**
- **the relevance of the national and local levels;**
- **ways to better reach out to and engage young people.**

The YAP as a tool for more meaningful youth participation

Members of the youth networks considered that the YAP should **be instrumental in fostering more meaningful forms of participation**, including by bringing more transparency in policy-making and combating tokenism. The YAP should provide inspiration and motivation to governments for more youth-inclusive policies at national level.

The need for more diverse and structured consultation processes

Participants called for the design of **a formalised and coherent consultation system for young people to be implemented by EUDs**– currently, some EUDs amplify the work of the EU with young people, but this is not a standard approach across all EUDs. Consultations should not be one-off events and should become **regular processes**. They should also be **decentralised** and inclusive to reach out to people who do not live in major cities or have access to the Internet.

The importance of inclusion

Members of the youth networks underlined that **‘being inclusive is the key to meaningful youth participation’**. The YAP should therefore address the participation gaps created by various barriers and forms of discrimination. Particular attention should be paid to the involvement of minorities and people living in remote areas.

The relevance of the national and local levels

Participants underlined **a need for synergy between EU action** (e.g. with the YSB at global and national levels) **and the work of youth organisations and movements at local level**. This synergy should rely on a good level of communication and information (impact- and evidence-based) between the different stakeholders involved. For the national level, members of the youth networks encouraged **EUDs to look at good practices in youth participation used by other organisations**: town hall meetings, dialogue sessions at every level, scholarships, and educational projects (including Erasmus+), making connections with national and city youth councils, etc. They suggested **shared minimum standards in youth participation** to be discussed and implemented **to ensure that EUDs, while taking into consideration the local/national contexts, work more towards the realisation of European values**. Participants also encouraged the EU to foster youth participation by **supporting and facilitating young people’s access to decision-makers at local and national levels**. They recommended the introduction of age quotas and youth delegates in governmental and law-making institutions. When relevant, the EU should also provide incentives for national governments to include youth in their decision-making processes.

Ways to better reach out to and engage young people

Members of the youth networks reminded that young people should have the chance to **receive information about global issues and be aware of participation opportunities**. They also reasserted the importance of young people to **have access to training and educational activities – when necessary – for more meaningful participation**.

Participants emphasised that, when adequately supported and empowered, **young people can play an instrumental role in reaching out to groups and communities that are further away from**

participation opportunities. In that regard, they recommended that the EU **invest more in alumni engagement.** The EU could rely on networks of alumni (of international/European programmes) to share about its work and the opportunities it provides for young people.

Finally, members of the youth networks would like to see **stronger ties between youth of different continents** (also with already existing international platforms) to have a more significant impact on global issues and especially climate change.

Based on your experience, what are the main challenges for meaningful youth participation at local, national and international level?

The main challenges identified by the members of youth networks are related to:

- **poor participatory approaches;**
- **limited information, access to the internet and age definition;**
- the existing **inequalities**, further **widened by the pandemic.**

Poor participatory approaches

Members of youth networks observed that on the ground, **international organisations and other entities are unevenly interested in engaging with young people.** They considered that **young people were not represented enough in law-making and decision-making processes** and that **sometimes the agenda of politicians differed from young people's.**

Participants noted that projects and programmes that are implemented by international organisations and embassies sometimes **lacked coherence.** Because of the **absence of or limited participatory approach**, the needs of the population – including youth – are not properly taken into consideration. In this context, some participants stressed that **local authorities often lacked competencies for involving young people.**

Limited information, access to the internet and age definition

Participants noted that **gaps in information and education don't allow young people to meaningfully take part in consultation processes** (e.g. the scientific information needed to understand climate change). They also pointed out that the **absence of or a limited access to the Internet** remains a major obstacle to youth participation and active citizenship.

According to the members of youth networks, **age limitation is an obstacle too often encountered by young people** when they want to engage in participation mechanisms and projects (one may be considered too young or too old). **Some suggested that flexibility regarding age limitation could be introduced to better take into consideration the various paths of professional and personal development of young people in different countries** (e.g. the age range to participate in the European Solidarity Corps could be enlarged).

Existing inequalities, further widened by the pandemic

Participants used the example of the Erasmus+ Programme to show the lack of inclusiveness as an obstacle to youth participation: they praised the many opportunities the programme offered while pointing out its limitations when it comes to **engaging with local communities in disadvantaged/remote areas.**

Finally, members of youth networks reflected on **the impact the pandemic had on growing inequalities.** Often, **access to vaccination is a key to full participation.** When young people have the chance to be vaccinated, the type of vaccine they receive can hinder their participation in various activities if the vaccine received is not accepted by all EU Member States. One meeting participant suggested that exceptions could be made and a softer approach could be adopted to allow young people to take part in educational programmes regardless of their vaccine type.

In addressing these challenges, where would the EU action have the biggest impact?

Participants identified the following areas of EU intervention:

- **access to funding for youth organisations;**
- **access to the labour market and broader economic opportunities;**
- **combatting discrimination and promoting peer learning for more meaningful youth participation.**

Access to funding for youth organisations

Members of the youth networks encouraged the EU to take action to **make funding for youth organisations and networks more accessible**, especially by designing **grant schemes that are specifically directed to youth organisations** or by **contributing to the administrative costs of running youth organisations** (registration, legal fees that can be quite high for young people in some countries). When needed, **support should be proposed to young people that apply for grants** as application processes are too often exclusive because of the amount of time and the level of skills they require.

Access to the labour market

Participants stressed that the labour market and the economy are also a dimension of participation. In that regard, they recommended the EU to **support youth entrepreneurship and innovation to develop new models of tackling environmental and social issues**. The EU could also **further help young people entering (or preparing to enter) the job market**, for instance by limiting unpaid internships and ensuring that the experience gained through volunteering is better recognised.

Combatting discrimination and promoting peer learning for more meaningful youth participation

Members of the youth networks invited the EU to **increase its efforts in combatting discrimination, gender inequalities particularly**. LGBTQIA youth are often seen as not as credible compared to their cisgender heterosexual peers. Women also tend to have fewer opportunities than men.

Participants would like to see the EU **invest more in peer-learning amongst young people**. **Youth-led information schemes** could be further developed to make young people more aware from an earlier age of all the many participation opportunities they can have access to.

Finally, members of the youth networks suggested that the EU should **rely on local focal points in EU and non-EU member states to support the implementation of the YAP**, especially in disadvantaged communities. Building links with other institutions, such as UNICEF, could be helpful in that regard.

Which should be the thematic priority areas of the Youth Action Plan?

Meeting participants listed a number of thematic priority areas for the YAP, including:

- **Climate Change;**
- **Children and Adolescent Health and Well-being** (quantifying the impact of health in SDG);
- **Entrepreneurship;**
- **Human rights;**
- **Support to minorities – Recognition – Equity;**
- **Youth in humanitarian action** (youth is facing security issues and are fighting against them, their contribution should be recognised);
- **Education** (both non-formal and formal education - empowering youth in leadership through educational institutions);
- **Support for youth-led organisations.**

In her concluding remarks, Bitania Lulu Berhanu, Special Adviser on Youth to the Commissioner for International Partnerships, highlighted the following points drawn from participant inputs:

- avoiding tokenism and ensuring meaningful youth participation
- pushing the EU to take a global approach while understanding partner countries' contexts;
- the importance of decentralised consultation processes;
- giving incentives to partner countries for meaningful youth engagement;
- monitoring and evaluating how young people are engaged.