OPINIONS

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU external action 2022–2027'

(own-initiative opinion)

(2023/C 184/02)

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(for/against/abstentions)	157/0/1

1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1. While welcoming the Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU external action, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) points out that there may be challenges in the roll-out and delivery, which will need monitoring and oversight. The EESC expresses its wish to be actively involved in the implementation of YAP.

1.2. The EESC believes that the expertise and experience of youth organisations in the EU, and around the world, is a great resource in the delivery of the plan, both for the European Commission and the EU delegations. It also considers that basic competences on issues such as youth-friendly spaces, consultation skills, and youth work-methods should be provided to all EU staff working with young people.

1.3. The EESC would like to see constant attention paid during implementation to the most marginalised young people, including young people with disabilities, and all leadership work being complemented by an equal focus on grassroots support for youth in local communities. Leadership and participation processes should be designed to ensure grassroots engagement and bottom up processes to produce leaders grounded in everyday life.

1.4. The EESC stresses that data collection and monitoring are a key challenge for the implementation of the YAP, and that regular reporting by the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), relevant funded agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) should feature, consistent with the mapping and gap analysis of international data on youth recently undertaken by the European Commission ([1]).

1.5. The EESC welcomes and encourages links with the work of the United Nations (UN) and its agencies in this area, particularly with regard to the Youth Peace and Security Agenda and any synergies with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

1.6. The EESC believes that headline EU youth policies like Erasmus+ and the Youth Guarantee can be helpful in working in the areas of youth engagement and youth polices. In utilising such structures, attention should be paid to the independence of application procedures and issues like visas and languages.

1.7. The EESC recommends the Council of the EU to encourage EU Member States to have their own plans that focus on similar issues as the YAP and work in partnership with civil society, in particular youth organisations. In addition, existing linkages and civil society partnerships between EU Member States and target countries should be built on and enhanced, particularly between youth organisations.

1.8. The EESC also recommends that target countries should be encouraged and given the tools to have their own tangible dedicated youth policies and national youth councils or equivalents. At the same time, the Commission should be guided by the principles of human rights when supporting the target countries.

1.9. The EESC believes that linkages should be made between the YAP and the European Year of Skills to ensure that this work is prioritised in partner countries.

1.10. The EESC is of the opinion that activities focusing on education should be centred on equality, particularly protecting young girls, and that strategies should ensure the engagement of hardest to reach. All scholarship opportunities should be open, transparent and have deliberate methods to encourage those hardest to reach.

1.11. The EESC strongly believes that civic engagement with all CSOs should be fostered such as youth groups, trade unions and young entrepreneurs groups.

1.12. The EESC considers that EU trade policy needs to examine its impact and connection with young people, particularly under trade and sustainability chapters and Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs).

1.13. The EESC recommends that specific mental health community-based services for young people and targets for both output numbers and qualitative mental health improvements should be developed for work with young people in external action, consistent with the European Commission's study.

1.14. The EESC believes that the fight against child labour should be an important part of YAP, so that child labour finally becomes history in the 21st century.

2. **Background information: relevant EESC activities**

2.1. In October 2018, the EESC adopted its opinion on the new EU Youth Strategy ([2]) highlighting the need for a cross sectoral approach to youth and the need for more attention to be given to employment, mental health, equality and education. It also highlighted the importance of the EU's external action policies in this regard.

([1]) Kalantaryan, S., McMahon, S. and Ueffing, P., Youth in external action, JRC130554, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022.

([2]) OJ C 62, 15.2.2019, p. 142.

2.2. In September 2020, the EESC adopted the opinion 'Towards structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision-making process' ([3]). It also called for establishing the Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables, including a youth delegate in the official EU delegation to the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP) meetings, and including young people's voices in EESC opinions concerning climate and sustainability.

2.3. In the opinion 'Youth Policy in the Western Balkans, as part of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans' ([4]) adopted in July 2022, the EESC invited governments of the Western Balkans to follow key youth policy documents of the EU and to further invest in evidence-based youth policies addressing youth development challenges, ensuring sufficient and transparent budget allocations.

2.4. The EESC is uniquely positioned to facilitate engagement with youth networks. It established a Coordination Group for the European Year of Youth (EYY) that received a mandate to strengthen cooperation with youth organisations and young people during and beyond the EYY, and to cooperate with other EU institutions and CSOs to ensure better cross-cutting integration of young people in their everyday activities. In September 2022, the EESC adopted the opinion 'The EU Youth Test' ([5]) and requested more structured, meaningful, and targeted youth participation.

3. **General comments on YAP**

3.1. The EESC very much welcomes the Joint Communication — Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU external action 2022 — 2027, which marks an important step in external action and youth policy, recognising the potential synergies between the two, which is much overdue. Furthermore, in the EYY, such a development also indicates a recognition that youth and the lives of young people cross all policy areas, and considerations of this group need to feature in all policy work, not just the 'traditional' areas associated with young people.

3.2. The war in Ukraine continues to have a severe impact on civilians, in particular on children, adolescents and young people. The focus of YAP in Ukraine, as well as in other areas of the world affected by conflicts, should be to increase youth resilience, support young people's civic engagement and empower them to be change-makers in their communities, especially in view of post-conflict recovery.

3.3. The Communication is also appropriately situated in the post COVID-19 world, and recognises how young people, their education and their freedom of movement suffered the most in this crisis. While recognised in Europe, the impact of COVID-19 on young people around the world has received less attention, particularly in the developing world and in fragile states.

3.4. In essence, we support the concept that all internal policies related to youth should be capable of being translated into our external relations, allowing for the specific local/regional contexts in which external action is taking place. In light of this, we would support that the Youth Test for EU policies is also recommended to those implementing the YAP.

3.5. The EESC also welcomes the fact that the YAP draws on the European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy that stress the need for equal, full and meaningful participation of young people in public and political life. Young people — although at the forefront of change — are still too often underrepresented, contrary to the fundamental rights they have. The EESC appreciates the YAP for its high level of ambition and clear focus on action. It also values that it recognises the intergenerational dimensions of today's global challenges.

3.6. The communication brings together all major policy work related to youth in different areas. In its delivery, it will be important to have some overarching oversight, particularly given the different delivery agencies and the diversity of policies involved. This should also involve those with responsibility for youth and education, youth organisations and young people themselves, as well as aid agencies and other national bodies of EU Member States, funded agencies and CSOs. Similarly, delivery will have to consider various financial sources, actors and indicators involved. Overall, this will be challenging, but an effective oversight system will pay dividends and could be a model of joined-up policy delivery.

([3]) OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 44.
([4]) OJ C 443, 22.11.2022, p. 44.
([5]) OJ C 486, 21.12.2022, p. 46.

3.7. Data collection needs to be improved for youth in nearly all areas of external action. The roll-out of the YAP needs to focus on this challenging area, as recognised in the mapping and gap analysis of international data on youth that was recently undertaken by the European Commission. It can be hard to disaggregate outputs and outcomes and to distinguish the precise contribution of any given programme or initiative to an outcome. Therefore, all interventions with youth need longitudinal analysis.

3.8. The EU and all its institutions should work with the United Kingdom (UK) to ensure that the spirit of cooperation and intercultural learning and developed experience from Erasmus+ and all other forms of cooperation is not lost to young people and youth organisations in that country. Every opportunity for optimising the potential for rebuilding relationships with CSOs in the UK should be explored, and conceiving and fostering new ones ([6]).

Leadership and participation

3.9. The YAP focuses to a considerable degree on leadership and participation. This is welcomed and very much in line with best practices in working with young people. The EESC believes however that a very thorough and deliberative approach will be needed in further rolling out such an approach in EU external action. Even within the EU and its Member States, we have a long way to go on participative practice despite strong efforts. Youth leadership generally arises from good grassroots work in a supportive environment. This in turn gives rise to young people who can speak up, but based on connections with their peers and experience of local issues like environment, transport, education, mental health, social assistance and many more. This work is often facilitated by CSOs. We hope the thematic programmes on Civil Society and Human Rights and Democracy can focus on these needs.

3.10. A number of associated factors therefore need to be present for good practice in this field. The Erasmus+ programme still seeks to prioritise young people with fewer opportunities, effectively recognising that a leading programme still has much to do in this area. In the field of People to People Contacts and Mobility, administrative aspects such as visas play a decisive role in ensuring a smooth experience for the participants, and there is a need for a common approach here. Applying these challenges to developing countries, fragile states or even totalitarian countries will clearly ramp up the challenges. At the end of the day, all the envisaged leadership and participative work must be built on grassroots and community-based experience.

3.11. We must be careful not to invert the process of working with 'leaders' first in the absence of any real grassroots traction. Funders and international non-governmental organisations can't create this leadership, and quality grassroots linkages need to be ensured. Therefore, we need transparent selection, open and inclusive methods and safeguards against capture by states and others, particularly in fragile states. Engagement, participation, and leadership skills are crucial and our approach must build an infrastructure to make it real. Long term support for youth organisations and civil society must be prioritised over short term project based approaches. Engagement with youth leadership also needs strategies to deal with a constantly changing group who are transient, who grow and develop and at some stage will need or want to move on.

3.12. Meaningful support to grassroots organisations that operate on the ground should be provided so they can develop internally and become relevant actors in their local communities. We hope the work of the Youth Sounding Board (YSB) on international partnership in this regard, and the dialogue platform with youth organisations as part of the Policy Forum on Development (PFD), will address this. In addition, support to trade unions and trade union youth organisations can help to encourage and support young people to participate democratically in their workplace. National Youth Councils can provide a good infrastructure to decide who to work with in partner countries, as long as they are independent, as can initiatives such as the Big 6 Youth Organisation's Global Youth Mobilisation initiative ([7]).

([6]) EESC Information report on 'The implementation of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement, including the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland'.

([7]) https://globalyouthmobilization.org/

Delivery methods

3.13. There are considerable and welcome references to Erasmus+ in YAP. In this regard, the communication avoids 'reinventing the wheel'. The structures and processes of the programme can and should be used in our external relations where relevant. In delivery, it may be helpful to disaggregate the sub-parts of the programme such as youth, schools, vocational education and training (VET) and third level education. Obstacles, like visas, lack of funding and language barriers should be removed, and the delivery should focus on mutual learning, skills development and experience. If national agencies are used, they should be cautiously vetted to ensure respect for proper civil society actors and their independence.

3.14. Initial VET (IVET) facilitates young people's employability in the future and their participation in lifelong learning. VET policies and good practices support the social inclusion and labour market integration of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs).

3.15. The communication makes useful links between EU external action and the rights of the child, where the EU has developed a strategy recently. More linkage with the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in delivering on the YAP would be helpful too, for example by utilising the Geneva committee's states' reports. Many young people are under 18 and principles in the UNCRC can serve as guidance, but EU youth work extends beyond this age. We should not always see 18 as an automatic dividing age.

3.16. A Team Europe approach needs to be applied to implement the YAP at national, regional and multilateral level. The EU should thereby adjust to the specific needs and circumstances in the different regions. The EESC believes that it would be beneficial if the partnerships contribute to filling knowledge and data gaps on youth, especially those related to the priority areas of digital skills development, climate change and the Green Deal. The EESC is interested to learn in the months to come how the manifold actions will be implemented and stands ready to contribute.

3.17. We would have hoped for a greater level of response during the YAP consultation process and more representativeness amongst responses. This shines a light on the need for young people to be provided with all the relevant information regarding important topics to allow them to make informed decisions and contribute accurately and meaningfully to the policymaking process. Tools like the European Youth Information and Counselling (ERYICA) Quality Label can be informative here.

4. **Specific Comments on parts of the YAP**

4.1. The provisions in the YAP represent the compiling of a lot of ongoing activities, and the challenges in implementation will be immense, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to education and equality between genders is critical and there has been progress in this field.

Education

4.2. Strong linkage with the European Year of Skills is needed in rolling out the YAP. The EESC points to the importance of skills development needs, especially in the field of climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as in the circular economy, mental and physical health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, to be taken into account, including in reskilling and upskilling young people ([8]). The roles of social and civic dialogue are essential and need to be strengthened.

4.3. Again, there will be multiple stakeholders involved in education, so clear goals and measurements are needed. A constant effort on the hardest to reach, particularly in the poorest and most fragile states is a must. The 10 % spending commitment from the European Commission's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and in the humanitarian budget is welcome and we would like to see the commitments of other agencies and states. The long-term solutions in education must come from governments in target countries and local CSOs should play a major role. The international community cannot be the principal actor in the long term. We hope that the Transforming Education Summit can advance on this.

([8]) OJ C 100, 16.3.2023, p. 38.

4.4. Provisions on scholarships and trusts are welcome, but we need to pay attention to selection issues and ensure the involvement of CSOs. It is important that transparent, fair and inclusive procedures for the selection of participants in academic programmes are defined when establishing these opportunities, prioritising access to individuals with fewer opportunities.

4.5. Maximising the value of human capital is vital to increasing competitiveness and to tackling unemployment, while respecting sustainable development. This requires a workforce that is equipped with a range of transversal skills and a capacity to adapt. Education and training policy must be developed and delivered in close cooperation with the social partners and focus more on competences than qualifications. This will help reduce the skills mismatch gap.

Youth organisations

4.6. There are several fora and bodies to engage young people set out in the communication. The Platform in the Policy Forum on Development is welcomed, as long as it ensures grassroots connections with youth organisations, which are independent, self-organised and ideally youth led.

4.7. There is a welcome mention and reference to involving youth organisations in the communication. The roll-out of the YAP would benefit from engagement in the diverse models of youth work practice present in the EU. This practice can be as relevant as young people's voices, as it builds capacity amongst all young people at local level and in turn gives rise to youth leaders grounded in local experience. Considerable evidence and models are available through the EU/Council of Europe Partnership and the voluntary youth sector.

4.8. Youth organisations can be a tremendous resource in the delivery of the plan. EU Member States should be encouraged to involve their youth sector in this field with national action plans. We should prioritise good models and work from EU youth organisations in development, conflict, and human rights work ahead of, for example, US 'youth development' models which are often used 'off the shelf' in developing countries and other regions, and are often not rooted in the same values. This would work well with the commitment to have tailor-made solutions for particular regions.

4.9. The roll out of commitments on education should also engage in informal and non-formal systems in communities, CSOs and youth work organisations. The Unesco and Council of Europe definitions provide good guidance here along with work in the Erasmus+ youth chapter. We need to recognise the immense benefits of learning outside the school setting for all which is lifelong and life-wide.

4.10. Political dialogue is important and the goals in the YAP are ambitious, but we should not neglect youth policies in each country and the responsibilities of governments, as well as the need for a true voluntary sector and civil society. The roll out of the YAP also needs to support youth work policy development, the development of national youth councils or similar bodies, and approaches like the EU youth test and others.

4.11. Youth organisations already have links around the globe, as illustrated by the work of the World's Big 6 Youth Organisations, and the roll out of the plan should involve them, build on the pre-existing work and be a model for more initiatives. We should also be careful about being too restrictive on the issues of participation. It is unclear if participative processes were utilised in selecting the issues for the Youth Empowerment Fund. Young people may not always select the issues others see as important particularly in the developing world or in fragile states where more practical considerations may be more important.

4.12. Provisions on capacity building for youth organisations are most welcome and should be accompanied by effective support to start grassroots movements in partner countries in which EU delegations can play a crucial role around the world. Partnerships should be offered here, where appropriate, with EU organisations and the work must be monitored. It is important to facilitate the creation and strengthening of networks with both EU and non-EU organisations.

Effective delivery

4.13. There are a lot of actors, policies and funding lines involved in this work such as the EU delegations, various Directorate-Generals of the Commission, the EEAS, the EU Council and the Member States, and a variety of aid budgets. The roll out of the YAP needs to ensure clarity and proper cross-sectoral cooperation to ensure a strong focus on the target group at the end of the day, while providing sufficient budget.

4.14. Contact making concepts can build on existing work and look at twinning and other Erasmus+ (Youth) initiatives. Also, Erasmus+ Youth Participation projects (without transnational dimension) might provide good models for youth projects in target countries.

4.15. Young people are the future leaders and change makers, and are essential partners in contributing to the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the digital transition. The Youth Action Plan should ensure EU external action empowers young people at a political, social and economic level. The EESC, acting in its commitment to implement the recommendation from the Conference on the Future of Europe to enhance the institutional role of the Committee and empower it as facilitator and guarantor of participatory democracy activities, such as structured dialogue with CSOs and citizens' panels, is ready to do its part.

4.16. The references to the transition to adulthood in the YAP are strong, very much welcome and in line with the values of youth work in the EU. Important issues here would be for young people to learn their rights and duties as citizens, financial literacy, foreign languages, sustainability of our planet and entrepreneurship. Similarly, the EESC welcomes the link with the UN Youth Peace and Security Agenda and the call for broader engagement with the UN. In delivering the YAP, we need to be conscious of the distance young people generally have from decision-making in many areas.

4.17. The UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth Peace and Security is a critical tool in engagement with young people globally. It identifies five key pillars for action: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships and disengagement and reintegration. This landmark resolution urges Signing Parties to give youth a greater voice in decision-making at local, national, regional and international levels, and to consider setting up mechanisms that would enable young people to participate meaningfully in peace processes. Support for those who wish to implement this agenda locally and nationally should be forthcoming. Linkage and coordination with the Youth Empowerment Fund would create a lot of synergies here.

Gender

4.18. The EESC believes that tapping into the potential of young people and supporting gender equality is key for sustainable development. The EU external action intends to empower young people at political, social and economic level and help them engage in decision-making and policy-making in a meaningful and inclusive way. The EESC sees the empowerment of girls and young women as vital to ensuring sustainable development and appreciates the references to ensuring gender equality and ending discrimination in the YAP. The EESC points out that the YAP should be translated into meaningful, strategic and long-term actions that will benefit young men and women equally. This includes developing strategies that promote gender mainstreaming in all areas of external action.

4.19. It is important to increase the number of young people, particularly young women, with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) capabilities and digital skills and to get girls interested in the STEM fields at an early stage, to support women entrepreneurs and female role models in these sectors and invest in programmes to make girls in high school interested in STEM.

Mental health

4.20. Reference to mental health is welcome in the communication and we hope it will feature prominently in the delivery of the YAP. Since health systems are weak around the world, the more 'youth friendly' implementation of improvements in this field should be fleshed out.

Persons with disabilities

4.21. Furthermore the EESC finds that referencing young people with disabilities in the communication is equally important and should also feature prominently in the delivery of the YAP. Young people with disabilities are an often-forgotten group when promoting empowerment and democratic participation of young people and should feature in the implementation of the YAP.

Economic opportunity

4.22. Right skills will be key to young people's future economic opportunities. Support will be needed for entrepreneurs and business startups, including finance and credit, since there will be many opportunities, not least in the digital field, especially in the developing world.

4.23. In the field of economic opportunities, the model of the EU Youth Guarantee offers a good example with appropriate adjustments to provide opportunities for NEETs. Education on labour and social rights will be needed to make the decent work agenda a reality.

4.24. Issues like trade need to be examined as part of the YAP, for example in sustainability chapters of free trade agreements, and the involvement of civil society such as youth organisations should be advocated. Young people remain the most vulnerable to child labour and other forms of maltreatment. In order to combat this, the fight against child labour should be made an important part of the YAP so that it finally becomes history in the 21st century. To this end, financial resources must be created to enable child workers to no longer be dependent on their income. On the other hand, the actionability of companies that use child labour in their global production chain must be restricted.

4.25. Young people are often the first to make perilous journeys to emigrate to Europe and elsewhere. To make sure that young people are not forced to take dangerous, often illegal paths over international borders, the YAP should include active cooperation with third countries in order to establish humanitarian corridors and resettlement programs for young people to get to Europe safely and legally.

Brussels, 22 March 2023.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Christa SCHWENG