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Summary

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) is concerned about the tense conditions young people are facing today, jeopardizing the positive development of youth and the sustainability of societies all over the world. Full and effective participation of young people and youth-led organizations and platforms is required in order to ensure development and social coherence. Demographic change, which is most obvious in developing countries, leverages the need for an intergenerational solidarity pact as well as a renewed Social Model, recognizing the period of transition towards an autonomous life, which marks the specific situation of young people. The YFJ calls upon a rights-based approach to youth policy, matching the needs of young people.

The 12th August 2010 marked the beginning of the International Year of Youth; Dialogue and Mutual Understanding. Taking into account all challenges young people, youth organizations and other stakeholders are facing concerning the year's set-up, the YFJ strives towards clear aims for the year and beyond. Namely, a commitment to strong youth participation in the UN's Inter-Agency Network on Youth and Development as well as a post-MDG strategy which includes a strong youth perspective. The Year should be an opportunity to strengthen youth participation in relevant frameworks, which will be sustained thereafter.

Introduction

'The capacity for progress of our societies is based, among other elements, on their capacity to incorporate the contribution and responsibility of youth in the building and designing of the future. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilize support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account. [...] Youth organizations are important forums for developing skills necessary for effective participation in society, promoting tolerance and increased cooperation and exchanges between youth organizations.' These quotes are taken from the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), adopted by all Member States of the UN at the 50th Session of the General Assembly in 1995.

Since its very beginning, the European Youth Forum (YFJ) has been involved in contributing to the WPAY, striving for its full implementation at the national, regional and global level. The YFJ is an independent, democratic, youth-led platform, representing national youth councils and international youth organisations from across Europe. The Forum works to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their

own lives, by representing and advocating their needs and interests and those of their organisations. The YFJ's vision is to be the voice of young people in Europe, where young people are equal citizens and are encouraged and supported to achieve their fullest potential as global citizens. Currently the YFJ has around 100 Member Organizations from across Europe, representing the diversity of young people within the region.¹ As a regional youth-led platform, the YFJ works with three main institutional partners, namely the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations and their respective departments and sections relevant to youth. With regard to the YFJ's work with the United Nations, the Millennium Development Goals and the World Programme of Action for Youth provide two concrete references and frameworks for youth development.

Right now, 50% of our global population is under aged 25, more than 18% are between 15 and 24 years old and are therefore considered youth – according to the UN's definition.² With 1.300 million young people now living in the world – the largest youth group in history - there has never been a better time or more urgent time to invest in youth.

The YFJ considers the UN as the body most relevant to govern global matters, and one that has a remarkable record of standard-setting in the area of human rights. Regardless there are specific circumstances and challenges. Young people all over the world share the same needs and must enjoy the same rights and strong support from all stakeholders. The World Programme of Action for Youth describes in its 15 priority areas as common aspects of young people. Some parts of the United Nations system have recognized the importance of working with and for youth. However, there is still a long way to go to ensure youth becomes a cross-sectoral issue in UN policy. Failure to seize this opportunity to empower young people more effectively to be active citizens could lead to widespread disillusionment and further social tensions – a development which can be monitored in various circumstances and regions.³ Bearing in mind the number of young people and their proportion in the society all stakeholders must recognize that investing in young people is not only an investment in the future, but in the present too. All decisions which are taken today concern young people - nowadays and in the future. All goals related to peoples and society's development must therefore include a strong youth perspective and strive to provide answers to their life circumstances. It needs to be said that the Millennium Development Goals are mainly Youth Development Goals since young people's education, positive development and contribution to the society are relevant for the present and the future. The global level is a field of utmost importance for young people and the therefore the YFJ and its Member Organizations are committed to working with and contributing to the UN.

¹ Mission and Vision of the European Youth Forum (www.youthforum.org)

² based on <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpay2010.pdf>

³ based on 'The European Youth Forum and the United Nations System: the way forward!'

Youth and their full and effective participation

In order to meet the needs of young people full and effective participation at all levels is needed. Only the involvement of young people in the preparations, decision making implementation and monitoring can ensure an efficient cross cutting youth policy matching the circumstances of young people's life. The United Nations Member States have recognized by adopting the youth resolution at the General Assembly 2005 for the first time that the implementation of the World Programme of Action and the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, require the full and effective participation of young people and youth-led organizations and other civil society organizations at the local, national, regional and international level.⁴

It should be kept in mind that in the current societal circumstances the disenchantment with politics, the mistrust towards political parties and the complexity of democratic decision-making processes is creating a democratic deficit, which is particularly relevant for groups that are underrepresented as well as underprivileged and therefore less involved in decision-making processes. Big parts of policy makers, institutions and civil society are aware of the existing need to improve the participation of young people and especially youth organisations in democratic decision-making processes, nevertheless the value of youth organisations for sustaining and strengthening democracy is not yet fully recognised and needs to be fostered. While the European Youth Forum acknowledges the changes in participation trends and the fact that not all young people are members of youth organisations, it is firmly convinced that non-governmental - and especially youth - organisations provide a solid and democratic representation of the interests of young people. Through their wide-ranging networks and democratic decision-making procedures as a crucial addition to representative democracy, youth organisations are giving young people the possibility to experience democratic decision-making in practice. Further, the YFJ is convinced that youth organisations are the actors to reach out to more and more diverse young people, as they are the closest ones to their lives.⁵ Recent developments in the Arab region have proven that young people – if they are excluded from social security, the society, employment, politics, democracy or decisions that are taken for the society and can't benefit from development – have the power and will strive for their rights and change their societies. The previously so-called lost generation of the Arab Region has caused what the TIME called a Youthquake, referring to a society where six out of ten people are below 30, compared to only 41% in the US. In a survey from May 2010 of the Middle Eastern youth, the number one wish of the young in nine countries was to live in a free

⁴ UN General Assembly's resolution 'Promoting youth participation in social and economic development' A/RES/62/126

⁵ based on the YFJ's 'Policy Paper on Democracy and Youth Organizations'

country, however. Certainly, jobs and the desire to live in well-run, modern societies ranked very high as well.⁶

Knowing its responsibility for young people in Europe and beyond the YFJ is coordinating and cooperating not only with its Member Organizations in order to effectively represent the voices of young people but has close ties to other regional youth platforms as well as to globally active International Youth Organizations. The main space for global cooperation for the YFJ is the International Coordination Meeting of Youth Organisations (ICMYO), which gathers membership-based, democratic, representative, and accountable International Youth NGOs (INGYOs) and Regional Youth Platforms (RYPs). The main objectives of ICMYO are the strengthening of the cooperation among youth organisations at the regional and global levels and the coordination of political inputs to global youth policy processes.⁷

In order to guarantee the legitimacy of political inputs on youth issues at the institutional level, the following principles have been valued and prioritised by the YFJ as guidelines to choose its youth partners in democratic processes at the global level:

- Internal democratic processes;
- bottom-up approach;
- accountability and transparency
- legitimacy and credibility;
- constructive and positive common goals;
- effectiveness and efficiency impacts;
- sustainability for global cooperation;
- respectful of cultural and ideological diversity, as well as
- human rights.

All this is not an obstacle for the YFJ's recognition of the expertise of researchers and other actors in the youth field but sets the clear precondition that political input on behalf of youth should be coordinated and put forward by democratic youth-led structures.⁸

Youth and the demographic change

Before the middle of this century, older persons and youth will comprise a roughly equal share of the world's population. The proportion of those aged 60 years and over is expected to double, rising from 10 to 21 per cent between 2000 and 2050, and the proportion of

⁶ 2nd Annual ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey

⁷ <http://icmyo.wordpress.com/about/>

⁸ YFJ's 'Policy Paper on Global Governance'

those under 14 years of age will decline by a third, from 30 to 20 per cent. It is forecast that the youth population will decrease from 18 to 14 per cent of the total population.⁹

This changing situation is most visible in developed countries and regions such as Europe. While life expectancy is increasing fertility rates are falling. This has not only changed the age pyramid of societies but also its coherence. Between 2005 and 2030, the working age population (15-64 years) is due to fall by 20.8 million. Moreover, the demographic dependency rate, defined as the ratio of the population aged 0 to 14 and over 65 to the population aged between 15 and 64 years, will rise from a rate of 49% in 2005 to 66% in 2030.¹⁰ This makes it obvious that while the EU is striving to become a knowledge based economy there is a need for a knowledge society alongside it. This can only be achieved by investing in the formal and non-formal education of young people in order to ensure life long learning. Formal and non-formal education are complementary, and ensures that education is not reduced to its economic value but aims to empower young people to contribute to society. Furthermore a comprehensive development of young people supports a smooth transition from education to work and an independent life.

Both older people and young people are facing discrimination due to their age; therefore in 2005 the YFJ asked, in the framework of the discussions around the EU's green paper on demographic change, for an 'intergenerational solidarity plan' and a 'renewed European Social Model'. This is seen as a set of measures able to harness the economic power of the free market, within a regulatory system designed not only to prevent abuses but also to guarantee the satisfaction of basic social needs and social security; a system that combines freedom and civil equality before the law with social justice and solidarity.¹¹ These measures need to guarantee the inclusion and empowerment of all young people, regardless of their social and economic background.

Without such a renewed Social Model, specifically targeting the needs of the respective region or country, demographic change jeopardizes the sustainability of societies all over the world and an intergenerational approach is particularly needed in times of economic crisis. The World Youth Report 2005 outlined demands, which are – from the YFJ's point of view, complementary. The report demands that 'increased attention should be given to the socio-economic impact of ageing societies. There is a case to promote a two-pronged approach: first, investing in individual life courses, which includes age-adjusted policies and programmes that encourage workplace flexibility, lifelong learning and healthy lifestyles, especially during transitional periods, such as youth to adulthood, family

⁹ World Youth Report 2005

¹⁰ European Commission's Green paper (2005)

¹¹ YFJ's 'Policy Paper on Youth & the European Social Model'

formation, or midlife to later years; and second, strengthening the social environment of family, neighbourhood and community.’¹²

Youth and their Rights

There is no doubt that globally there is a need to recognise young people as a demographic group, between childhood and adulthood, with specific needs. This period of life is marked by transition – for example from the educational system to work, from being protected to being responsible and autonomous members of society. During this period the young person is facing tremendous challenges related to their situation and to establishing their own space and approach to life, gaining employment, setting up their own family, accessing services and this is a situation that needs more attention. Although the International Year of Youth in 1985 was followed by the development of numerous national Youth Policies, there is still a lack of legal frameworks which would be particularly beneficial to the development of youth.

Young people moving from education into work are at a particularly vulnerable point in their lives, and this is especially the case for the least qualified, who generally experience the greatest difficulties in establishing a foothold in the labour market. One year after completion of initial education, a significant proportion of young people are not in employment, although the situation varies considerably across EU Member States - with employment rates ranging from 16% in Greece to 77% in Denmark.¹³ Although there are considerable differences between Member States, the important general finding is that youth with low qualifications have significantly lower employment rates one, five and ten years after leaving initial education (OECD, 2008). Surveys from the last decade state that after examining many other factors higher youth insecurity is associated with higher co-residence rates with parents – in other words, young people are becoming autonomous at a later age.

Therefore a rights-based youth policy should strive to actively promote the autonomy of young people as well as their full participation in society. Protection against discrimination should be strengthened and specific measures to include young people with fewer opportunities in society need to be put in place. Youth rights encompass a wide range of basic rights and fundamental freedoms, already enshrined by international and regional human rights instruments. Young people have different needs and face different challenges than children and adults, which should be legally codified through youth rights.¹⁴

¹² World Youth Report 2005

¹³ ‘Employment in Europe report’ (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities)

¹⁴ YFJ’s ‘Fact sheet on Youth Rights’

The YFJ aims to work towards the full realisation of the rights of young people as a prerequisite to further develop and build a democratic Europe with a sound social and economic model at all levels able to ensure the full development of the human and social potential of young people.¹⁵

Youth and their International Year

The International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding, which was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly 2009 and started on 12th August 2010, provides a chance to mobilize young people and youth-led organizations worldwide in order to raise awareness, develop constructive and new solutions as well as discuss their needs. While the first International Year of Youth – celebrated in 1985 – was decided upon in 1979, stakeholders were this time around confronted with setting up an International Year in less than eight months. As a result, when the current Year on Youth was proclaimed, youth organizations and relevant institutions, such as the UN Programme on Youth, had already planned and budgeted their activities for the upcoming year without having included specific IYY activities. This left them feeling a lack of ownership over the year. While many stakeholders were committed to making the most out of the year, the objectives, priorities and concrete aims remained unclear. In addition, the vast majority of governments all over the world remained reluctant to provide youth organizations with additional funding or other resources. Despite these challenges many projects and activities have already been held at all levels.

The International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding is an opportunity to stress young people's needs and use the year for bringing youth on the political agenda where it was not done before; in particular, the year provides international youth organizations and platforms with a chance to raise awareness concerning the global dimension of youth work. A widespread means of running events in the frame of the International Year of Youth is to 'label' planned youth activities and add a global dimension. Examples are capacity building activities with a focus on global and interregional youth work, activities of Universities and new partnerships between youth organizations in different regions.

Besides the commitment of youth organizations and platforms, institutions and governments need to support young people and youth organizations with financial resources, a youth friendly framework and the necessary recognition. Bearing in mind that the year will soon have reached its last third, there is still the opportunity to bring young people and their needs back to the political spotlight, foster the discussion towards the rights of young people and the role youth has in the global development agenda. The last

¹⁵ YFJ'S workplan 2011 - 2012

month of the year, including the UN High Level Meeting on Youth, can be a starting point for developing a post-MDG strategy for beyond 2015, which includes a strong youth perspective, stressing the link between investing in young people and sustainable development. The YFJ is advocating for a think tank – which includes experts from youth-led organizations – in order to set up this strategy.

Furthermore the Forum sees a need for improved youth participation at the global level; recent negotiations have displayed a lack of understanding and recognition of youth participation. Official Youth Delegates are still an exception – counting 27 UN Member States at its peak. Furthermore we see a need to establish permanent youth participation at the UN's Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development.

The clear aim of the YFJ and numerous other youth-led organizations and regional youth platforms is to advocate towards concrete and measurable results by the end of the International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding in order to end the 12 months with success for young people worldwide and in order to give them a perspective for the future.