



European Youth Forum`s Reaction to the European Commission`s Communication “Youth Opportunities Initiative”

Introduction

The European Youth Forum is very concerned with the worsening of the crisis. The vicious cycle of a weak recovery and high debt risks endangering the future of the Euro, the European economy, the cohesion of European societies and ultimately the achievements and progress realised over 50 years of European integration. At the same time, the Youth Forum is convinced that austerity measures alone are not the answer in tackling the difficulties that many young Europeans face in accessing the labour market. Many of them are un(der)paid or work in extremely precarious conditions, while still striving to become autonomous and active citizens. Increased investment in education, training and youth, combined with incentives for new job creation, is fundamental. Cuts in those budget lines can only make the crisis worse in the long run.

In this view, the European Youth Forum welcomes the importance given to the fight against unemployment in the “Youth Opportunities Initiative” Communication published by the European Commission on 20th December 2011.

Immediate follow-up action in partnerships needed

The main proposal of the Communication is the potential use of 30 billion Euros of uncommitted ESF funding that would help to fight early school leaving and develop the employability of young people. The European Youth Forum welcomes the fact that for the first time, it is acknowledged that regions and countries with high youth unemployment and NEET rates are also the ones that encounter the biggest challenges in spending structural and cohesion funds.

Nevertheless, the Youth Forum is concerned about the way in which the proposal will be enforced. There will not be a real “redeployment” of money but only assistance from the European Commission on how to better spend the money already available under the current financial cycle, through the establishment of *ad hoc* task forces in the 8 countries most affected by youth unemployment. Therefore, no “fresh” resources will be available for the Member States and regions that need additional resources to fight youth unemployment. That is why we do not consider the implementation of this proposal alone to be in line with the social and economical emergency young people face.

Furthermore, the Communication does not indicate which specific tailored measures could

ensure faster and easier access to these funds for the Member States (re-programming, accelerated implementation, fast-track procedures, etc.) in order to speed up this process. Again, there is a risk that there will be no real push or facilitation in using these funds in favour of youth.

Moreover, the European Youth Forum believes there to be a lot of unexplored potential in implementing such projects in partnership with organised youth civil society. Youth organisations not only have an exceptional outreach to European youth but also a specific expertise in working with and involving young people. Therefore, the European Youth Forum is urging the European Commission and Member States to facilitate youth organisations' access and partnerships in accessing the EU funding used for improving the situation of youth, also devoting a specific amount in favour of Youth Organisations and National Youth Councils. Some cases of direct support from state budgets to organised youth civil society – coming from Member States such as Finland – have demonstrated the outstanding potential of individuals involvement, active citizenship promotion and social exclusion prevention possessed by youth organisations.¹

The Youth Opportunities Initiative calls for strong partnership between Member States and the Commission and encourages concerted action between Member States' authorities, businesses, social partners and the EU. The European Youth Forum is calling on the above mentioned partners to get engaged and to put youth on top of their priorities.

Nevertheless, while the European Youth Forum is looking forward to concrete policy measures and implementation mechanisms coming from European countries and the different partners, it is also requesting that young people would not be only targets of such schemes but also consulted as main stakeholders. The mechanism of structured dialogue between young people, Member States and EU Institutions currently used in the field of youth policy should be enlarged to all fields where the interests and needs of young people are discussed or at stake.

Main missing parts: a youth guarantee for all youth & quality internships and apprenticeships

It is very important to see the initiatives launched at EU level and the Youth Forum welcomes also the European Council's commitment² that the Union will re-direct EU funds to support young people in accessing work or training. There are however, two main key concerns of the European Youth Forum that we do not see addressed:

1. The Communication proposed greater use of apprenticeships, traineeships and placements in enterprises. The Youth Forum believes that such work placements should take place as part of education and should be enhanced as they give

1 In Finland, the share of lottery and pools proceeds spent on youth work amounts to €34,228,000 in the 2006 State Budget. In addition, youth work receives €4,723,000 from general budget funds for youth workshop activities and preventive substance abuse welfare work. The Ministry supports financially some 100 organisations, which have a total of 6,000 local associations and 800,000 individuals as members. Young people under 29 years of age constitute 36% of the population of Finland. Last 7 years the funds distributed to youth NGOs have increased.

2 30 January, 2012 Statement of the Members of the European Council

practical skills to young people. Ideally, post-graduate work placements that do not constitute proper employment should not exist. Moreover, the above mentioned Council statement did not address the issue of the quality of new internships and apprenticeships. The European Youth Forum believes that to avoid further deterioration of youth labour market, all new internship and apprenticeship opportunities should be coupled with efforts to improve their quality. For this reason, the European Youth Forum and its partners are promoting a European Charter for Quality Internships and Apprenticeships³, that would enforce quality standards of such workplace experiences for all young people in Europe.

2. The unprecedentedly high youth unemployment rates require policies that should not only target and reach first job seekers, recent school leavers and graduates, as is currently proposed by the Communication. The European Youth Forum believes that this represents a considerable limitation since a Youth Guarantee plan should include provisions to facilitate the (re)entrance of all young people, including those in precarious jobs, in the labour market within four months. The 17th June 2011 Council Conclusions on promoting youth employment to achieve the Europe 2020 objectives, speaks of a youth guarantee that should target “young people neither in employment nor in education or training, and their return to education, training or the labour market”. Thus, the present Communication represents a deterioration of commitment in this regard.
3. The Communication should also be followed by a discussion on how to harmonize social security networks at European level, through a better coordination of employment and labour policies, in order to ensure the coverage of young people that are still in transition from education to employment, starting up their own businesses or those in short term or precarious working arrangements. In this regard, we consider the implementation of a minimum income scheme, already approved by the European Parliament, as a fundamental step to ensure the completion of the EU single market.

Mobility Actions

The Youth Opportunities Initiative covers not only youth employment, education and skills, but also mobility. Supporting the mobility of young people is one of the cornerstones of the Communication.

Taken alone, the job mobility scheme could deepen the gaps and disparities among different EU areas in terms of employment rate and human resources attractiveness instead of addressing the mismatch between vacancies and job seekers. This measure should be strictly accompanied by the actions foreseen supporting the funding for education and VET, the access to work and the recognition of skills ("Agenda for New Skills and Jobs", "European Skills Passport, including recognition of Non-Formal Education

3 More information on the European Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships is available here: <http://www.qualityinternships.eu>

learning outcomes”). While the Youth Forum is pleased that the European Commission wishes to increase its investment in the European Voluntary Service (EVS), the Forum would like to point out the importance of several other actions supported by the Youth in Action programme that contribute to the development of skills and competences of young people and to youth employability.

Using Europe 2020 governance to help the European youth

While stimulating employment and creating growth remain the prerogatives of Member States, they often have a lacklustre track record in implementing EU decisions. The European Youth Forum therefore calls for immediate action at national level and, where applicable, at regional and local levels. Furthermore, the European Youth Forum expects ambitious plans within the National Reform Programmes and will do its best to contribute to this process in Member States through its national members. The European Youth Forum would like to point out however that stakeholder involvement by national authorities in the consultation process concerning National Reform Programmes remains a serious obstacle in many countries.

The Youth Opportunities Initiative Communication outlines concretely how the Europe 2020 Strategy implementation process will be used to improve the situation of young people not in education, employment or training. Namely, the European Commission will address the youth dimension in its country specific recommendations to Member States. The Youth Forum welcomes this commitment and together with its national members will engage in strictly monitoring the implementation of these recommendations.

Conclusion

Young people, in times of crisis and economic austerity, do not need nice words but strong investments. The European Youth Forum therefore welcomes the Youth Opportunities Initiative but is awaiting immediate follow-up, implementation and actual improvements for young people's lives across Europe, especially for those who are facing unemployment or are no longer at school. The European Youth Forum believes that the involvement of organised youth civil society is also crucial. Youth organisations in Europe would like to contribute to this work with their expertise and reach out to European youth. Young people must be a political and financial priority for Europe. Young people deserve nothing less!