

EUROPEAN UNION



Committee of the Regions

EDUC-041

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OPINION
of the
Committee of the Regions
of 16 February 2006
on the
**Communication from the Commission to the Council
on European policies concerning youth
Addressing the concerns of young people in Europe –
implementing the European Youth Pact and promoting active citizenship**
COM(2005) 206 final

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the *Communication from the Commission to the Council on European policies concerning youth: Addressing the concerns of young people in Europe – implementing the European Youth Pact and promoting active citizenship* (COM(2005) 206 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the European Commission of 30 May 2005 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its President of 25 July 2005 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject;

HAVING REGARD TO the *European Youth Pact* (Presidency conclusions of the Brussels European Council (22 and 23 March 2005) 7619/05 Annex 1);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion on the *Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council - Creating the "Youth in action" programme for the period 2007-2013*¹ (CdR 270/2004 fin)²;

HAVING REGARD TO its global opinion on the *follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth - Proposed common objectives for voluntary activities by young people and Proposed common objectives for greater understanding and knowledge of youth*³ (CdR 192/2004 fin)⁴;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion on the Commission's Communication on the *Follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth. Proposed common objectives for the participation and information of young people, in response to the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 regarding the framework of European cooperation in the youth field*⁵ (CdR 309/2003 fin)⁶;

1 COM(2004) 471 final.

2 OJ C 71 of 22.3.2005, p. 34.

3 COM(2004) 337 final and COM(2004) 336 final.

4 OJ C 43 of 18.2.2005, p. 42.

5 OJ C 22, 24.1.2001, p. 7 and COM(2003) 184 final.

6 OJ C 121, 30.4.2004, p. 10.

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion on the *Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass)*⁷ (CdR 307/2003 fin)⁸;

HAVING REGARD TO the draft opinion of the Commission for Culture and Education, adopted on 7 December 2005 (CdR 253/2005 rev. 2) (rapporteur: **Mr Pella, Member of Cossato Municipal Council (IT/EPP)**);

adopted the following opinion at its 63rd plenary session, held on 15-16 February 2006 (meeting of 16 February):

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1. Introduction

The Committee of the Regions

- 1.1 **takes note** of the Communication on European policies concerning youth, implementing the European Youth Pact, and welcomes its wide-ranging overview of the issues, which covers many different EU policy areas;
- 1.2 **welcomes** the element of continuity that this Communication brings, following on from the Commission White Paper on *A new impetus for European youth*, the Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 and the Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs, adopted by the Commission on 12 April 2005;
- 1.3 **endorses** the objective of strengthening youth policies in all areas of activity, given that investing in young people is essential for Europe's future;
- 1.4 **stresses** the need to for all levels of decision-making – EU, national, regional and local – to work actively to ensure that youth citizenship can be genuinely harnessed in all political contexts in European society. It is particularly important that initiatives aimed at improving quality of professional, social and family life should be forthcoming, in order to create the conditions for active citizenship for young people. It is vital to the EU institutions' long-term integration and legitimacy in the eyes of the European public for young people to become involved;

⁷ COM(2003) 796 final.

⁸ OJ C 121 of 30.4.2004, p. 10.

1.5 **emphasises** that real participation by young people can only be guaranteed if the EU's proposed initiatives involve local and regional authorities, youth organisations and all the social partners who have various degrees of contact with young people. The success of the initiatives outlined by the Commission chiefly depends on whether such a consultation process is properly implemented.

2. **Application of the Open Method of Coordination**

2.1 The CoR hopes that the application of the open method of coordination will make sufficient use of the role of local and regional authorities, thereby respecting their remit.

2.2 The CoR **believes** that, with regard to youth policies, the objectives of the open method of coordination should be: a) to draw young people into local life so that they become more involved in policies concerning them; b) to reach a stage where, in framing EU and national policies, greater consideration is taken of the specific needs of young people. The role, remit and knowledge of local and regional authorities are central to achieving these aims, particularly with regard to the specific strategy outlined in the Communication.

2.3 The CoR therefore **recommends** that the participation of regional and local authorities in the design, implementation and monitoring of youth policies be guaranteed at national level by Member States and at EU level by the Council.

3. **Employment and social inclusion policies**

3.1 The Committee **welcomes** the Commission's approach to youth employment and social inclusion policies; young people are particularly at risk of unemployment, lack of job security and low wages. In particular, the CoR feels it is important to fully implement the related aspects of the Lisbon Strategy, which aims to increase both the quantity and quality of jobs.

3.2 The CoR calls on the Commission to propose quantitative targets with regard to combating youth unemployment (currently 18% at EU level).

While it is the duty of Member States to implement these policies, it is at the political and administrative level of local government in each State that responsibility lies for carrying out, developing and managing the processes of integrating employment, social and inclusion policies, anti-discrimination policies and policies combating social exclusion.

3.3 The shaping of measures designed to proactively recast and restructure welfare systems in order to increase the scope for young people to participate in the workplace and in society in general, requires a radical change in the approach taken to issues of inclusion/exclusion, in such a way as to gain a global understanding of the social conditions of youth. The employment aspect is inextricably linked to a whole range of *socially enabling conditions* such as good health, basic education and society that encourages and nurtures initiative.

- 3.4 In the case of European employment strategies and competitiveness measures, national and European action plans and structural funds are directed towards the objectives of employment growth, equal opportunities and social cohesion. Increasing the adaptability of workers and enterprises to economic change and increasing employability levels provides young people with a testing ground for integrated policies implemented and integrated mainly at local level.
- 3.5 The CoR **calls on** the Commission to promote measures, by common agreement, fostering the development of knowledge, skills and of all implementing instruments which serve to strengthen and capitalise on the work of local and regional government, with particular reference to:
- exchange of information and good practice (partly through permanent trans-national networks whose work is effective and verifiable);
 - common and comparable training for the key players in youth-oriented local and regional policy-making.
- 3.6 Such action should be taken to increase the effectiveness of the contribution of local and regional authorities in the following key areas:
- system of matching supply and demand;
 - pathways into the labour market;
 - employment measures for social inclusion;
 - information and communication campaigns on the institutional set-up of the labour market and on the changing professions;
 - links between training systems and the economic/business world;
 - economic back-up measures for social inclusion.
- 3.7 The Social Inclusion Strategy can improve the situation of young people (particularly the most vulnerable) insofar as there is to be effective integration, at EU and Member State levels, of the various policies directly implemented by local and regional authorities. To this end, the development of each social inclusion strategy and of the mutual learning employment programme will benefit from the active and direct involvement of the various local and regional authorities.
- 3.8 The joint cooperative efforts of the various levels of government can then be focused on the difficulties young people have in entering the labour market. These difficulties are evidenced not merely by unemployment levels but also by the levels of inactivity among young people, who are neither studying, nor working, nor even seeking employment – a particularly serious issue considering that many young people drop out of compulsory education before the age of eighteen.

3.9 The CoR **calls on** the Commission to encourage the inclusion in national reform programmes of measures to ensure sufficient financial and organisational support for youth entrepreneurship projects.

4. **Education and training**

4.1 The CoR **stresses** that the European Youth Pact must not lead to a harmonisation of either the content of education and training programmes at EU level, or the organisation of education and training systems, as these areas are the full responsibility of Member States and in some cases of local and regional authorities. This in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty, which limits the Commission's competence to developing the *European dimension in education* and *developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States*.

4.2 The CoR **hopes** that information exchange on best practice (and on measures and procedures) developed by individual Member States will be enhanced and stepped up to ensure the active and effective participation of local and regional authorities in the process of adapting qualifications systems and frameworks.

4.3 In particular, each initiative towards the framing of a European qualifications framework – which will be linked to and supported by credit transfer and quality assurance arrangements, to the common European principles for identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning and to Europass (the European single framework for the transparency of diplomas, certificates and competences) – will require the contribution of local and regional authorities, including in the monitoring and initiative-assessment stages.

4.4 Naturally, this should also apply to the test phase of Youthpass – part of the Commission's Europass initiative – planned for 2006. In this respect, appropriate economic and procedural instruments will have to be put in place.

4.5 The same procedure should be used in the case of the Commission's proposal to invite Member States to provide more transparency and information about employment and training opportunities, in order to make mobility easier, as part of the modernisation of employment services and to reinforce their strategies for removing obstacles to mobility. In this respect, the assessment and implementation of initiatives such as the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and the information portals EURES (European job mobility portal), and PLOTEUS (portal for learning opportunities in Europe) will also be able to take better account of the needs of young people insofar as they will incorporate local authorities' assessments and proposals.

4.6 The need to coordinate national education systems, in order to maximise the free movement of citizens and the development of local systems, can also be met by stepping up information and good practice exchanges. Specifically, EU support for transnational dialogue and

collaboration can accompany Member States' efforts towards establishing a comparable validation framework for non-formal and informal education.

4.7 Close cooperation between EU institutions and local and regional authorities is needed to help develop the role of universities as centres of knowledge and cultural exchange for young Europeans. This can also be achieved if universities are more firmly anchored within their locality and if they take on board the principles, methods and styles of partnership more thoroughly and systematically.

5. **Mobility**

5.1 The CoR **welcomes** the fact that the Commission document is fully in line with EU policies on the free movement of workers and the mobility of students, teachers, trainers and trainees, particularly young people.

5.2 The CoR therefore **fully supports** the Commission's stance on the mobility of young people within Europe, for both training and employment purposes.

5.3 For the purposes of increasing knowledge of Europe and of the way it operates and of involving young people in political life, the CoR **calls on** the EU institutions to set up a youth programme based on the United Nations model, which would involve secondary school pupils and university students in a genuine simulation of the work of the EU institutions (European Parliament plenary sessions, Council meetings, etc.).

5.4 The issue of youth mobility is no longer limited to within the EU, but is increasingly concerned with non-EU countries. The Committee **hopes** to see closer cooperation between the Commission, Member States and local and regional authorities in efforts to promote the involvement of young people in voluntary organisations and international solidarity. Proper attention should be paid to cross-border mobility. The EU population currently comprises large minorities originating from immediate neighbourhoods, whose mobility should be promoted and contacts harnessed. In this regard, NGO networks from different Member States, operating in the same area of development, could provide a testing ground for support action from local, national and EU levels of government, working in synergy with each other.

5.5 As another step towards real mobility of young workers within the EU, the CoR **calls on** the Commission and the Member States to encourage stronger emphasis on language learning within national programmes.

6. **Reconciling work and family life**

6.1 The Committee would again **emphasise** the autonomy of Member States with regard to the shaping of policies and methods for promoting the reconciliation of professional and family life.

6.2 Here too, the Commission's efforts could be directed towards strengthening and increasing the opportunities for exchanging and mainstreaming the wealth of information, knowledge and experience built up by regional and local authorities, both in the areas referred to by the Commission and in the promotion of equal opportunities across the generations.

7. **Participation and support measures for active citizenship among young people**

7.1 The CoR **believes** that the Commission should operate a sustained policy of debate and consultation with young people, aimed at being as effective as possible, on programmes and initiatives that they have developed themselves, in the course of which new procedures could be tested.

7.2 To this end, local and regional authorities, according to the territorial structure of each Member State, being closest to local circumstances and the first point of contact for young people in the process of integration into political, civil and economic life, must be able to play out their full role, and must do so effectively. Consultation with local authorities should be accompanied by measures aimed at:

- stepping up the exchange of experience between decision-makers and youth policy stakeholders at local level, also to foster mutual learning;
- incentivising the establishment of permanent networks and supporting their ongoing exchange and dissemination of good practice and mutual assistance, aimed at updating strategies, methods and instruments for promoting youth participation;
- creating means and instruments for participation that facilitate initiatives launched by young people, to enable them to be involved in projects and activities that they themselves have promoted.

Transnational dialogue helps to *strengthen* and stabilise experience, reducing the risk of it fading too early.

7.3 The Committee believes that the Member States should run campaigns on participation and how to exercise citizenship, and aim to promote, through school and training programmes, awareness of the responsibilities that each individual must assume in a democratic society, particularly within their community. In this context, schools and secondary education centres must be viewed as an important common space where young people can become involved and learn how democracy works.

7.4 The CoR **hopes** that the exchange of good practice regarding ways of involving young people in local government will be promoted, as well as mobility initiatives to enhance knowledge of the various forms of local government, with a view to fostering better-informed participation in political life.

- 7.5 The Committee calls on regional and local governments to promote experiments such as "Youth Councils", which are not only a mechanism or a means of involving young people and for entering into dialogue with them, but are also practical methods of training these young people to be active citizens.
- 7.6 However, to support local participation and active citizenship, the Commission must encourage the joint transnational drafting of precise criteria and details regarding the specific objective of participation, i.e., details concerning how it will work, its scope, who will be involved, etc.
- 7.7 To eliminate or minimise the risk that only the large national networks will benefit from youth consultation and participation, it will be necessary to actively involve youth organisation networks operating at local level. To this end, it would be useful to directly involve local and regional authorities that have developed models within their own area for programming and administering consultative youth policies.
- 7.8 The CoR **hopes** that in implementing the planned initiatives (the campaign *For Diversity – Against Discrimination*, the European initiative on the health of children and young people, the public consultation on sport focusing on the educational and social values of sport for young people, etc.) the Commission will not underestimate the key role that local and regional authorities can play in reaching out to, informing, raising the awareness of, motivating and galvanising groups and individuals.
- 7.9 The CoR **is pleased to note** that much of the responsibility for youth policies lies with Europe's local authorities and regions. It is crucial, therefore, that local and regional authorities take some share of the responsibility for young people's education, work and leisure.

8. **Support programmes for policies concerning youth**

- 8.1 The Commission and the other EU institutions can play a key role in creating appropriate operating conditions and instruments to allow Member States to properly exercise their rights. The multi-faceted and horizontal nature of youth problems requires the various levels of government, in accordance with their particular responsibilities and remit, to have an up-to-date understanding of the issues at hand.
- 8.2 The CoR therefore **calls for** the introduction of initiatives aimed at developing a coordination mechanism for youth observatories which, making use of work carried out in other multi-faceted horizontal areas:
- avoids a proliferation of information systems and platforms;
 - integrates and links existing EU databases, so that data on young people can be developed and cross-referenced;

- exploits and integrates into an EU network, the good practice gleaned from the observatories on youth issues that is disseminated within Europe and promoted by local and regional authorities;
- encourages local observatories to specialise, thus reducing the risk of wasteful overlapping.

- 8.3 The CoR **hopes** that the specific programmes and measures for spreading awareness of and exchanging good practice and for training local players in youth policy will help to spread a European youth policy culture, thus creating a European area in which decision-makers can compare notes on the implementation of youth policies. In particular, the CoR is willing to work with the Commission on a new campaign to publicise the content of the European Youth Pact.
- 8.4 For the youth policies to be effective it is vital to set up impact and outcome assessment procedures. Given that there are no established recognised models in the area of youth policy, assessment would allow experience to be built up, increase know-how, and produce coherent reproducible models. More specifically, local and regional authorities must be involved in the assessment procedures.
- 8.5 In the development, organisation and implementation of each individual programme and measure, the role of the regions and of local authorities in the governance of youth policies must be enhanced, combining the principles of vertical and horizontal subsidiarity, which is particularly important at local level. Consequently, when youth programmes and measures are implemented, experience of effective, balanced and representative partnerships must be exploited and promoted.
- 8.6 The CoR stresses the need to mainstream the youth dimension in EU policies. In the case of cultural initiatives, where in the past some account was taken of the added value of youth mainstreaming, due consideration must also be given to the need to direct funds towards and allow scope for initiatives implemented by and aimed at young people. We must also stress the importance of social equality and of equal opportunities across the generations, partly in consideration of the risk of social exclusion faced by young people.
- 8.7 The CoR **calls for** recognition to be given to the key role of local and regional authorities in the implementation and assessment of the Youth and European Voluntary Service programmes. The same recommendation applies to the Youth in Action Programme 2007-2013. Only in this way can we ensure that the projects are locally based, have the required impact in the areas concerned and are effectively integrated into local policies.
- 8.8 The CoR **believes** that youth measures must take into account other issues, apart from those covered by the European Youth Pact, which - even if only indirectly - could help achieve the objectives of the Pact itself. More specifically, we would highlight as particularly relevant the problem of housing (given that it concerns policies on employment, mobility and the

reconciliation of work and family life), and other areas of family welfare and policies on access to credit. Member States must therefore be encouraged to make greater efforts to develop effective reforms in these areas.

8.9 The CoR also **calls on** the Commission to encourage, in line with the Lisbon Strategy, the inclusion of measures in national reform programmes, aimed at:

- stepping up action to counter the growing risk of social exclusion among young people, in particular by fostering the development, at all levels, of initiatives for improving access for all young people to all of their rights (social, political and civic) and enabling them to fully exercise those rights;
- promoting youth policies in national reform programmes and putting their implementation high on the agenda;
- helping deserving young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to reach higher levels of education and preventing them from dropping out;
- provide young people with an appropriate system of social shock absorbers;
- promote artistry and creativity among young people, fostering self-employment in these area;
- establishing specific forms of support to enable young people in general and in particular young people on low incomes, those who are unemployed or disabled, young women and young immigrants to participate in social and political life;
- helping young people who live in rural and disadvantaged areas to integrate into cultural, social and working life;
- providing incentives for young people to take up voluntary work.

9. **Financial resources**

9.1 The CoR **points out** that, consistent with the complexity of the issues in question, the Commission document is too vague with regard to the financial resources required for the practical implementation of youth measures.

9.2 It therefore **recommends** that in the successive phases of framing EU directives, specific European funds be systematically allocated, given that such ambitious youth projects, which are undoubtedly needed, require financial resources which Member States themselves often cannot provide. Ultimately, the CoR urges the Commission to earmark increased funding for European youth policies.

9.3 The CoR **recommends** that the process of simplifying administrative procedures be continued and stepped up, in order to facilitate access to the programmes and initiatives, not only for local and regional authorities but chiefly for young people themselves and their representatives. This would make for reduced costs, simplified processes and shorter implementation times.

- 9.4 The CoR **hopes** that adequately funded programmes will be introduced to follow on from the measures announced in the Commission Communication. Aside from the specific programmes (Youth and EVS), a degree of funding could be allocated to every EU programme for specific youth measures.

Brussels, 16 February 2006.

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Michel Delebarre

Gerhard Stahl
