



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/349
An EU Strategy
for Youth

Brussels, 1 October 2009

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on

An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering

A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities

COM(2009) 200 final

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Rapporteur: **Mr Sibian**
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On 27 April 2009 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering - A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities
COM(2009) 200 final.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 1 September 2009. The rapporteur was Mr Sibian.

At its 456th plenary session, held on 30 September 2009 and 1 October 2009 (meeting of 1 October 2009), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 133 votes to none with five abstentions.

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1. **Conclusions and Recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC feels that within this framework a strategy should be developed not only FOR youth but also WITH youth who should be included in the policy-making process as well as in its implementation.
- 1.2 Due to the subsidiarity principle, youth policies are mainly the responsibility of the Member States. However, many of the youth challenges in present-day society cannot be fully approached without a more global and holistic design. Therefore an integrated European Youth Policy strategy is welcomed.
- 1.3 All of the selected fields of actions are cross-sectoral and cannot stand alone. They are interlinked and influence each other. Therefore they must be approached in a horizontal way guided by the needs of young people.
- 1.4 The EESC feels that following represent critical factors in ensuring the success of the future strategy:
 - the coordination process,
 - prioritisation of fields of action,
 - co-interesting all the relevant stakeholders,

- allocation of the necessary resources,
- support for youth work and youth structures.

Therefore, the EESC puts forward the following recommendations:

- 1.5 Youth work and youth structures should be the main link in raising awareness and managing all the proposed fields of action in the EU youth strategy through a cross-sectoral approach.
- 1.6 As learning can arise in different environments, non-formal learning complementing formal education should be further supported.
- 1.7 Creating links between school, work, associations and voluntary activities should further be addressed at EU and national level.
- 1.8 Supporting entrepreneurial activities through funding mechanisms is challenging but necessary. Entrepreneurship must not be limited to its economic meaning but seen in a broader way.
- 1.9 Young people should become actors in society as their participation in all aspects of their lives is a precondition to policy development in the youth field.
- 1.10 A wide range of youth work systems, activities and good cooperation services needs to be put in place all over Europe to prevent marginalisation. All activities oriented towards youth at the risk of social exclusion should not approach them as passive receivers of social services but rather as active actors.
- 1.11 Recognising the skills obtained through volunteering activities is essential (including recognition in formal education). Accumulated non-formal skills and knowledge can be used both on the labour market as well as to improve participation in civil life.
- 1.12 Projects and activities should develop in young people a sense of global solidarity, awareness, responsibility towards the global community. To avoid the dangers along their route, young people must be able to hope for decent wages for their immediate future as a fruit of their work to come, thanks to the creation of conditions that encourage proper wage policies.
- 1.13 The EESC regrets that the proposed Strategy does not specify concrete methods of implementation and ways to measure progress at European and Member State level. It is, however, expected that the OMC will remain the main tool. The EESC believes that it should be complemented by a renewed European Pact for Youth. The EESC calls also on the Social Partners and the European Commission to adopt an agreement to improve mobility and employment of young people.

- 1.14 Young people should be at the centre of the strategy. Youth work and participation in youth structures is the most effective way to reach them. Therefore, the evaluation and improvement of quality of youth work should be a priority.
- 1.15 The Commission should encourage the Member States to introduce measures increasing chances for employment and enabling young people to become independent, such as:
- support during the initial training (financial aid, housing, counselling, transport, etc.),
 - integration allowance for those seeking their first job,
 - good quality apprenticeships and internships,
 - conversion of internships into open-ended employment contracts.

2. **Proposal of the Commission**

- 2.1 The current framework for cooperation in the youth field, based on the Youth White Paper, European Youth Pact (2005), the open method of coordination (OMC) and mainstreaming of youth issues into other policies, was scheduled to expire in 2009 and did not always meet expectations. As a result, after a broad consultation process in 2008, the European Commission came up with a proposal for a new cooperation framework. The European Commission named its Communication, launched in April 2009: An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering.
- 2.2 The new strategy proposal is based on three overarching and interconnected goals, each of them featuring two or three fields of action:
- **Goal: *Creating more Opportunities*** for Youth in education and employment –
Fields of action: **education, employment, creativity and entrepreneurship.**
 - **Goal: *Improving Access and full participation*** of all young people in society –
Fields of action: **health and sport, participation.**
 - **Goal: *Fostering mutual Solidarity*** between society and young people –
Fields of action: **social inclusion, volunteering, youth in the world.**

In each field of action a list of specific objectives and actions for the Commission and the Member States is proposed.

3. **General comments**

3.1 **Better coordination needed**

- 3.1.1 Important social challenges such as lack of social security, rising xenophobia, obstacles to employment and education, can easily cross borders, thus jeopardising the European social

model. Due to the economic crisis, such issues need more than ever a coherent European response. Although these social challenges do not exclusively address young people, this category is one of the most vulnerable.

3.1.2 The EESC feels that the European and national levels should be better coordinated and have clearer roles. The differences existing among the Member States should be considered and regarded as a source of fruitful synergies rather than a problem. The Commission should strive for a stronger link between the European and national levels in youth cooperation and look to reinforce and improve the implementation of European objectives on the national, regional and local level. The consultation process in the youth field that preceded the launch of the strategy proposal proved that youth policy has become more prominent not only at European but also at national level.

3.1.3 The EESC feels that the proposed strategy represents a step further. To succeed, the EESC recommends addressing the following challenges:

- **Representativeness.** Although the OMC and Structured Dialogue are useful instruments, there is a need to constantly assess and improve their implementation and to develop further consultation tools involving in policy making the grass root youth organisations, governmental bodies, young people themselves as well as other stakeholders¹.
- **EU youth policy awareness.** A higher visibility of the measures at European level would be beneficial for young people as they should be aware that the opportunities available through the youth cooperation cycle (such as youth exchanges) stem from EU youth policy.
- **Differences between countries.** Coordinating and bringing together 27 national approaches in the European cooperation framework, is a challenging task. In some countries several fields of actions approached have a long standing tradition and the EU strategy could benefit from their experience while in some others these fields of action have just been implemented. However, the new strategy should bring an added value to every single Member State.
- **Communication challenges.** A common approach should be followed in order to disseminate and collect comparable data in a structured manner to improve the progress reporting and analysis. Result oriented common indicators should be agreed.
- **Implementation.** There are also big differences between Members States in capacities to implement European policies. Some countries have well developed systems, reaching regional and local level, while in others there are very few resources dedicated to European cooperation on youth issues.

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Only 33% of young people consider that they play an influential role in society at European level and 50% consider that they lack the opportunities to make their voice heard (Results of the on-line consultation in the youth field - 2008).

3.1.4 The EESC calls on the Commission to use its existing powers and authority in encouraging and guiding the Member States to implement the strategy. The Commission should clearly undertake its role in the coordination process of the strategy.

3.2 **Making the cross-sectoral approach a success**

3.2.1 The suggested fields of action according to the Strategy proposal (see point 2.2) cover a broad social and economic area. None of the action fields is directly linked with a specific age bracket but they are extremely relevant to young people. However, some of the fields of action are better developed concerning the objectives to be achieved while some other remain rather general.

3.2.2 The EESC feels that pursuing eight thematic fields of action simultaneously poses an ambitious challenge and therefore recommends that the following issues should be addressed:

- setting up a coordinating body within the European Commission and clear procedures for the overall coordination process to steer, manage, monitor and evaluate the implementation process both at European and at national levels involving relevant stakeholders (including youth organisations) and corresponding bodies that are in charge of fields of action (e.g. a different organisation within other European institutions including the Council of Europe) with the regular meeting of joint working parties, peer learning exercises and considering the renewed European Pact for Youth;
- setting up clear objectives within an agreed time frame and setting up a road map for each of them;
- prioritising fields of action and ensuring that all will be closely monitored;
- co-interested stakeholders (such as youth workers, practitioners, researchers, experts, social partners, politicians etc.) and involving young people and youth structures in an improved and continuous structured dialogue;
- setting up a reliable, transparent and systematic approach in the implementation of the strategy;
- inclusion of the youth dimension in the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy to facilitate the social and professional integration of young women and men;
- allocation of the necessary resources by creating new tools or adapting the present and future generations of programmes such as Youth in Action, Lifelong Learning Programme, PROGRESS, MEDIA, Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, Competitiveness and Innovation Programme, Structural Funds. Such tools should be coordinated and complement each other;
- decrease bureaucracy and ensure better transparency for managing projects and activities addressing the fields of action;
- support youth work and youth structures should be regarded as a main pillar to address all the thematic fields of action and participation the underlying principle across the board.

3.3 Youth Work as a tool to implement the strategy

- 3.3.1 The EESC welcomes the emphasis on the important role of youth work. Youth policies should be designed and carried out for the benefit of ALL young people. The youth field has become an important vehicle for social change² developing transferable skills and compensating for missing formal certificates (especially for the disadvantaged groups). Still, more efforts should be put into the recognition of skills acquired through youth work. The role of youth organisations in empowering young people should be strengthened, as they provide a space for self-development, learning to participate and the development of skills should be better acknowledged.
- 3.3.2 Youth work is related to activities that intentionally seek to impact young people and are placed in a variety of environments and structures (such as a volunteer youth organisation, community-based youth centres, dedicated settings steered by public institutions or the church). However, there is a need for a clear definition of this term.
- 3.3.3 Youth work should become a transversal element integrated into all the fields of action encompassed by the strategy proposal. Therefore the quality of youth work should be an explicit target if the new long-term strategy for youth policy is to reach out to all categories of young people. The programmes such as Youth in Action and Leonardo da Vinci Sectoral Programme should aim at developing, supporting and better training those involved in youth work including professionals, contributing to the development of more professional skills in youth work.
- 3.3.4 Youth work tends to have mainly users in a 'pre-employment' situation in their lives; ranging from the teenage years to those with special needs; economic migrants; disabled groups and the disadvantaged in poor communities. Although not a direct tool for access to work itself, youth work and participation in youth structures offers more on social integration and could further benefit from closer cooperation with vocational training services and increased visibility of its contribution to the employability of youth.

4. Specific comments on the fields of action

- 4.1 The EESC comments on the content of eight suggested fields of action in spite of the fact that there might be more proposals for other priorities or that those suggested might be prioritised.
- 4.2 *Education*
- 4.2.1 Education has always been not only a key aspect of personal development and growth but also a factor for the development of society itself. The EESC has stressed that teachers'

² See the research findings in the UP2YOUTH project presented in the EU Youth report launched in April 2009.

education and professional training are closely related to other key policies, including youth policy³.

4.2.2 Non-formal learning can complement formal education and provide the necessary skills that can be better developed in a less formal system while formal education can integrate non-formal methods applying lifelong learning principles.

4.2.3 In order to make learning more attractive and efficient for young people⁴ and to acknowledge the role of non-formal learning, the following issues should be addressed and followed:

- introducing non-formal learning methods in formal education,
- creating easy transitions between formal and non-formal learning opportunities,
- steering young people towards learning through experience,
- linking schools with local youth work,
- putting the young person at the centre of the learning process,
- recognition of the skills obtained through volunteering and non-formal learning (the Youthpass certificate is a good example and this should be expanded to cover more actions and activities, including outside the Youth in Action programme),
- A clear system for assessing the skills acquired through non-formal and informal education should be put in place.

4.2.4 The proportion of young people forced to work in order to fund their studies is steadily increasing, and this has even become a key factor in exam failures.

4.2.5 Youth in Action and programmes such as the Comenius, Erasmus and Erasmus Mundus could envisage actions and better targeted funding to put into practice such desiderata in the future. Those programmes should be made more accessible to all categories of young people.

4.3 *Employment*

4.3.1 There is a direct link between education and employment: the higher the level of education, the lower the risk of unemployment⁵. Early school leavers in particular encounter great difficulties in finding a job, resulting in low incomes and in the risk of suffering poverty and social exclusion.

³ See EESC Opinion of 16.01.2008 on "Improving the Quality of Teacher Education", rapporteur: Mr Soares (OJ C 1(51), 17.06.2008).

⁴ 67 % of young people and youth organisations are not satisfied with the national education systems (Results of the on-line consultation in the youth field - 2008).

⁵ According to the EU Youth Report launched in April 2009, among the Member States people with lower secondary education are nearly three times more at risk of unemployment than those with higher education.

- 4.3.2 Social inequality has increasingly and markedly led in recent years to unequal success in studies and in gaining qualifications and access to skilled jobs. Young employees are in insecure situations, earning low wages with indecent working conditions and standards of living. Qualifications are no longer an insurance against unemployment or deskilling, and society must do its part to help those affected by addressing these issues.
- 4.3.3 In order to give all young people secure prospects for the future, apart from improving skills it is especially important in this context to strengthen active labour-market policy measures targeted at young jobseekers and to eliminate structural problems affecting the transition from training to employment.
- 4.3.4 Looking for better paid and more attractive jobs makes many young people leave their home country. This applies to all educational categories leading to a permanent “brain drain” migration, especially from the new Member States. This is distinct from temporary mobility which is positive for all (young people, societies, economies) and which should be encouraged within the EU.
- 4.3.5 Labour represents a factor of personal and collective dignity as well as a factor of social inclusion. Insecurity in the work place, low wages and overtime hinder the reconciliation of professional and personal/ family life.
- 4.3.6 The transition of young people between school and work should further be addressed at EU and national level. Without well developed career guidance and counselling as well as education systems adapted to the needs of the labour market, the issue of youth unemployment will remain unsolved.
- 4.3.7 Bearing in mind the above, the EESC recommends that the Strategy should build on specific measures in the following areas:
- providing better and more accessible education and vocational training, so as to enable young people to find their place in the labour market with as few problems as possible and stay in employment;
 - implementing measures to ensure that short-term and insecure employment does not become the norm for young people;
 - developing generally available, easily accessible careers advice and information facilities for young men and women at all levels of training, and creating more opportunities for quality internships and apprenticeships (through a kind of European quality framework),
 - ensuring early active support for young people seeking training courses places or jobs, and special programmes for the integration of problem groups such as long-term unemployed, young people and school and training course drop-outs, e.g. via community employment projects and promotion of training;
 - improving cooperation between educational institutions and employers,
 - creating links between educational systems and business, where this is useful,

- creating links with the associations and recognising voluntary activities,
- promoting best practices among all the actors concerned,
- developing further the New Skills for New Jobs initiative of the Commission
- encouraging mobility through a new generation of programmes⁶.

4.3.8 The initiative to use Youth Employment as the theme for the 2010 structured dialogue cycle is welcomed and represents a good opportunity to promote this issue.

4.3.9 In the world of work the role of the social partners is particularly important. The European social partners are strongly committed in this field and higher participation of young people with skills and competences which fit the labour market needs has always been one of the priorities in their joint work programmes.

4.4 *Creativity and Entrepreneurship*

4.4.1 Supporting innovation in youth projects and entrepreneurial activities through funding mechanisms is a challenge, but it should be taken up to give opportunities for participant-oriented learning. More financial resources to promote such initiatives are to be welcomed, since in many Member States national funding is scarce or non-existent.

4.4.2 Entrepreneurship must not be limited to its economic meaning but be regarded in its broader, holistic sense as the entrepreneurial spirit, of identifying or creating an opportunity and taking action aimed at realising it, regardless of the field (social, political etc).

4.4.3 The EESC recommends that social entrepreneurship among youth should be encouraged and supported.

4.4.4 Programmes to develop creative thinking and problem solving should be available at all education levels.

4.4.5 "Mentoring programmes for start-up business (entrepreneurship) should be created as well as support schemes for all types of entrepreneurship⁷."

4.5 *Health and Sport*

4.5.1 Sport and physical activities are important tools for reaching young people. They contribute to a healthy lifestyle, active citizenship and social integration. As a pre-condition less

⁶ See EESC Opinion of 17.01.2008 on the communication "Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society", rapporteur: Mr Trantina (OJ C 151, 17.6.2008).

⁷ Conclusions of the Youth Event, organised by the Czech Presidency of the EU Council on 2-5 June 2009 in Prague.

emphasis should be put on sport as a spectator activity, mass participation should be promoted as well as recreational and non-competitive sports.

- 4.5.2 Sports gatherings with active participation are quite common at recreational sports clubs and attract young people from different social backgrounds. A great potential can be achieved when linked with the use of non-formal learning methods in youth workers regarding the promotion of sport and physical activities to young people.
- 4.5.3 Youth organisations at EU and national level should be involved to a greater extent in the current EU campaigns fostering healthy lifestyles addressing: nutrition challenges, alcohol-related harm, tobacco and drugs, mental health. Revisions of EU strategies concerning those issues should have a stronger emphasis on young people as a special group. The Commission should also consider drafting an EU strategy on sexual health, with a particular focus on youth.
- 4.5.4 The EU Health Programme should be promoted among youth organisations. The programme could be a source of additional funds for the promotion of healthy lifestyles . Youth organisations should be encouraged and benefit from this EU initiative, working together with health professionals.
- 4.5.5 The Commission and the Member States should also look into the issue of health and safety at work of young people. National and European data suggest that young workers are at greater risk of having an occupational accident. The incidence rate of non-fatal accidents at work was more than 40% higher among those aged 18–24⁸ than among older workers.

4.6 *Participation*

- 4.6.1 The EESC feels that the proposed Strategy should have a pragmatic approach to participation and it should be more than a political instrument. There is a need for a real and transparent dialogue among young people and decision-makers at all levels (European, national, regional and local).
- 4.6.2 The EESC sees the potential ways to achieve this goal:
- developing user-friendly and attractive participation methods,
 - creating participation opportunities and structures for young people,
 - transferring and exchanging good practices,
 - creating and supporting youth councils at local, regional, national and European level,
 - developing opportunities for the disadvantaged and informal groups of young people to express themselves,
 - removing obstacles to mobility providing a key for young people's participation and better understanding of European themes,

⁸ European Statistics for Accidents at Work (ESAW).

- making full use of participation instruments already developed by different actors at European and national level⁹,
- steering a continuous structured dialogue involving all the key actors (such as young people, youth organisations, youth workers, practitioners, researchers, experts, social partners, politicians etc.).

4.6.3 The participation of young people in youth structures and in broader civil society should be increased. There is also a need for a clearer understanding and better promotion of concepts such as participation and active citizenship.

4.7 *Social Inclusion*

4.7.1 Fostering young people's potential should be a constant preoccupation of society. Therefore, the approach towards disadvantaged young people should be optimised through specific measures.

4.7.2 Youth work and non-formal learning are powerful tools for integrating young people. Early school leavers or people from a migrant background can be better approached in non-formal settings designed to prevent potential social exclusion. The process should not be problem-oriented nor be focused only on those who are in trouble already.

4.7.3 The EESC recommends setting up dedicated action for projects and activities to address disadvantaged young people directly (this could be inserted in the present Youth in Action programme). This should not replace the overall priority of the programme, but rather give a better focus on social inclusion of disadvantaged a youngster.

4.7.4 More effort is required to achieve social cohesion in the regions, where youth involvement is lower.

4.7.5 The declaration of the year 2010 as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion represents a good opportunity to foster and develop this theme.

4.8 *Volunteering*

4.8.1 As the EESC has stated in previous opinions, volunteering represents a valuable experience for personal development, social and professional inclusion in society and it plays an important role in the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities¹⁰.

⁹ Such as the *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life* developed by the Council of Europe: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Resources/Documents/Bibliographies/Political_participation_en.asp.

¹⁰ See EESC Opinion of 13.12.2006 on "Voluntary activity: its role in European society and its impact", rapporteur: Ms Koller (OJ C 325, 30.12.2006).

- 4.8.2 To strengthen the role of volunteering, the European Union should ensure that the need for a better recognition of voluntary activities is kept on its policy agenda. A good example that could be expanded is Youthpass. Initiatives such as European Voluntary Service should be further developed and the value of volunteering should also be recognised in other forms of involvement (e.g. the other actions within Youth in Action).
- 4.8.3 More synergies should be developed between national and European volunteering systems. In this respect, by working with different concepts of volunteering, the definition of volunteering should be harmonised so that it can be applied in different contexts.
- 4.8.4 As previously recommended, it is essential in the field of volunteering to ensure better cooperation between existing national and European programmes, to reduce technical obstacles as well as deal with health insurance coverage and accident insurance. The EESC called on the European Commission to consider developing a brand for exchange programmes meeting the Union's quality standards. Quality of voluntary activities, whatever form they take, is important and needs to be ensured by the appropriate means¹¹.
- 4.8.5 Efforts should also be made in order to prevent voluntary service replacing different forms of employment.
- 4.8.6 The EESC calls on the Council to adopt the Commission proposal for a decision on declaring the year 2011 to be the European Year of Volunteering. International Volunteer Day, celebrated on 5 December, also provides a good opportunity to promote and develop this issue.
- 4.9 *Youth and the World*
- 4.9.1 Young people are also "factors" directly affected by the globalisation process. A better knowledge of the impact of globalisation on young people through scientific research, is needed. Through participation in projects and activities that develop a sense of global solidarity and awareness, young people feel more responsible towards the global community.
- 4.9.2 Global issues (environment, climate change, sustainable development) should be mainstreamed into youth policy so that youth policy and young people's projects contribute to developments in this field. In return, youth should be considered when global policies are addressed.
- 4.9.3 The initiative to use Youth and the World as the theme for the 2011 structured dialogue cycle is welcomed and represents a good opportunity to promote this issue.

¹¹ See EESC Exploratory Opinion of 25.02.2009 on "European Civic Service", rapporteur: Mr Janson, Corapporteur: Mr Sibian (OJ C 218 of 11.9.2009).

5. Tools and Implementation of the new cooperation framework

- 5.1 The EESC regrets that the proposed Strategy does not specify concrete methods of implementation and ways to measure progress at European and national level. It is, however, expected that the OMC will remain the main tool. The EESC believes that it should be complemented by a renewed European Pact for Youth.
- 5.2 The future cooperation framework should be based on an improved structured dialogue that is as inclusive as possible and developed at all levels, involving young people, youth workers, youth organisations, national agencies, researchers and other stakeholders throughout the policy cycle, and across policy areas. It should be based on a broad bottom-up approach including various forms of active citizenship and involving young people with fewer opportunities.
- 5.3 Policy-making within the proposed Strategy should be evidence-based and as transparent as possible. The EESC recommends that the database of the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy¹² be used for publication of all the reports, data collection and analyses.
- 5.4 Young people should be at the centre of the process and youth work is the most effective way to reach them. Therefore, the evaluation and improvement of quality of youth work should be a priority.

Brussels, 1 October 2009.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Mario Sepi

¹² <http://youth-partnership.coe.int/youth-partnership/ekcyp/index>.