

A EUROPEAN UNION YOUTH STRATEGY

Some Considerations



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International
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Brussels Office

Youth as protagonists of their social environments

Any strategy related to youth must be underpinned by the conviction that they should be protagonists in the process of social change. For youth to realise this potential, other social actors they interact with need to see them in this light, and demonstrate their confidence that youth can arise as agents of change. Youth themselves also need to believe that this potential resides within them.

However, the social forces that distort how youth see themselves are becoming stronger. Mounting global, national, and local challenges, and the divisive and antagonistic ways such challenges are often approached, can leave many youth feeling powerless in the face of what seem like insurmountable problems.

And yet, at a time of life when young people wrestle with the fundamental questions of who they are, how they should relate to others, and what their place in the world is, they possess great capacity to reimagine themselves and their society. If adequately supported and encouraged, this natural capacity enables them to become active protagonists of change, not simply passive bystanders in a world being made for them. It is during this crucial moment in life, one of great opportunity and great challenge, that youth will require the wholehearted attention of European policymakers, so that they can help shape the progress of society.

Broadening the role and purpose of education

One of the most fundamental conditions for youth to realise their potential as protagonists of social progress is access to empowering educational processes.

However, narrow conceptions of education and its purpose can limit a young person's capacity to flourish, to make informed choices about the future, and to meaningfully contribute to society. Educational systems that reduce

education to the assimilation of information or the acquisition of technical skills needed to compete in the labour market, conceptualise a young person's learning trajectory as a ladder to climb at a faster pace than others, promoting harmful pressures and superficial incentives, and can stifle rather than cultivate a thirst for knowledge that propels a fulfilling educational journey.



If youth are to be protagonists, education must inspire them to use their endowments not only for their own progress, but for the betterment of society as a whole. In this respect, education systems must cultivate the capacity to analyse one's society—its needs and possibilities for progress—must nurture a sense of moral responsibility towards that society, and must assist young people to explore in both theory and practise how they can use the knowledge gained during their education to address these needs. In this way, young people can come to see

engagement in meaningful work, for example, not merely through the lens of self-interest, but as a powerful means to serve society.

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Strengthening community life and intergenerational relationships

Beyond educational settings, other social spaces in which youth are present have a significant, often overlooked, formative impact on them. A local community that connects diverse individuals and families in a reciprocal web of mutual support, trust, and solidarity, provides another environment in which youth can both develop the capabilities and qualities necessary to contribute to social progress, and at the same time receive support in facing the various struggles on the path to adulthood.

Intergenerational relationships are a crucial component of community life. Older members of a community can provide advice and encouragement, while regarding youth as capable protagonists whose ideas are to be

embraced with open-mindedness. Similarly, nurturing in youth responsibility for the social, intellectual, and moral development of generations younger than themselves, can strengthen their sense of agency and purpose, and inspire them to exemplify high ideals. In turn, the care youth extend to the next generation ensures that rising cohorts of children will have support as they pass through their own adolescent years.

What this requires is a reimagining of the social relations at the heart of European society, and a collective process of learning on how local communities can be strengthened and the generational fragmentation of society be overcome.

Fostering youth commitment towards all of humanity

The many challenges facing humanity cannot be resolved without the understanding that humanity is one, and that the well-being of any segment of the global population is contingent upon the well-being of the whole. Therefore, every dimension of a European strategy for youth must give attention to nurturing

conviction in humanity's essential oneness. Without this, even well-intended efforts to empower youth will fall short of creating the conditions for effective cooperation at the local, national, and international levels that are crucial to addressing the many existential issues confronting humanity.

Bringing diverse populations together

Youth have an irreplaceable role to play in devising solutions to all of the challenges facing European society. There is, however, one challenge that warrants their special attention: that of ensuring that the European continent, blessed with cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, becomes a place where youth and populations of various backgrounds feel they belong and can play a part in shaping its future.

Youth must be at the vanguard of efforts to build a new set of relationships among diverse populations at the grassroots, grounded in the conviction of the oneness of humanity. Prejudice is perpetuated in social contexts in which individuals merely live side by side without opportunities for meaningful interaction. At the local level, youth can learn to bring diverse individuals together and engage in activities that

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contribute to the well-being of the entire village or neighbourhood. While youth possess great capacity to convene, they also require sustained encouragement from their communities and institutions, such as municipalities, community centres, and arts, leisure, and sports organisations.

Participation in consequential decision-making processes

Treating youth as meaningful protagonists of their social environments also requires their participation in processes and spaces through which consequential decisions are made, particularly those that shape policy. Fostering a culture in which youth feel that their voices are heard and their opinions valued will need to go beyond the establishment of formal mechanisms for youth participation. It will require cultivating a posture of openness and

humility towards the creative and sometimes challenging insights that young people will bring to policy discussions. If youth are given such creative space, they will not only be able to contribute to existing policy processes, but can bring fresh ideas to help rethink and reshape current social structures. In this respect, young people should not be regarded merely as the inheritors of existing social systems.

Youth and well-being

Younger generations across Europe are experiencing increasing levels of loneliness, isolation, frustration, hopelessness, and lack of self-worth, giving rise to profound concern for their well-being. The relationships, environments, and purposeful contributions to society described above are essential to a young person's true flourishing and well-being. However, the strength of the forces that breed passivity and distort young people's sense of self-worth should not be underestimated. Entire industries, for example, are growing ever-more proficient at monopolising the attention and energy of young people with endless entertainment and distractions.

There is a need to question this course that society has set itself on, and to reflect on the extent to which a young person's development in today's world is being compromised by unbridled access to destructive content, carried through the medium of technology. Focused attention is required, including by youth themselves, to the question of how systems for the promotion and regulation of media, technology, and culture can be reshaped towards socially constructive ends.



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