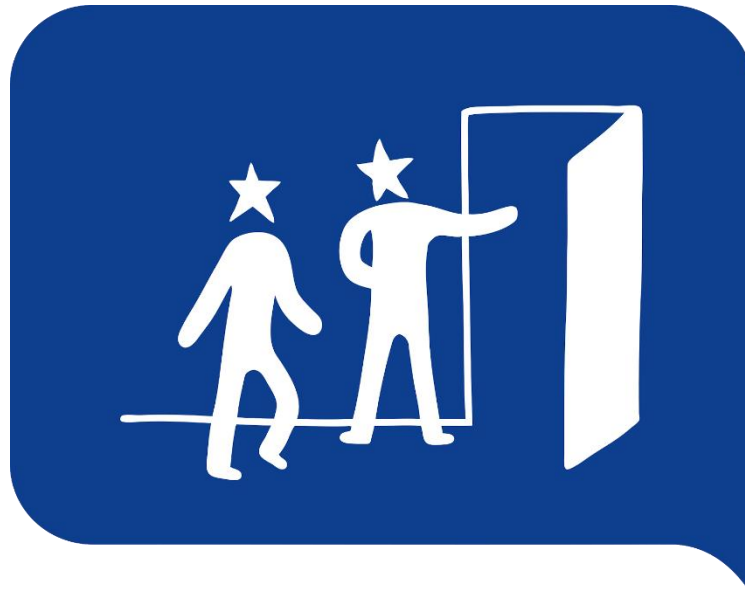




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Achieving Youth Goal #9 Target 6

Findings from the 8th Cycle of EU Youth Dialogue Qualitative Consultation



Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for all: Strengthen young people's democratic participation and autonomy as well as provide dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society.

Young people are underrepresented in decision-making processes which affect them although their engagement is crucial to democracy. They need access to physical spaces in their communities to support their personal, cultural and political development

YG#9 Target 6: Ensure sustainable funding, common recognition and development of quality youth work in order to strengthen youth organisations and their role in inclusion, participation and non-formal education.

Guiding question used in the EUYD8 consultation: What measures/actions should be taken to develop smart youth work so it appropriately supports young people's participation?

Key topics in this report: *participatory budgeting, investments in infrastructure, financial stability, autonomy, funding requirements, bottom-up initiatives, recognition of youth work.*

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Target 6: Ensuring sustainable funding for youth participation

By and large, **youth work** is ‘a broad term covering a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes’¹. In order to integrate technological developments in youth participation and empowerment, ‘**smart youth work**’ emerged as a more recent ‘innovative development of youth work encompassing digital youth work practice, and including a research, quality and policy component’². The Youth Dialogue activities asked participants what measures/actions should be taken to develop smart youth work so it appropriately supports young people’s participation. The topic of promotion and recognition of youth work has already been explored extensively under the Finnish Presidency in EUYD7³. The National Working Groups tried not to duplicate these discussions.

Recent context, new developments

Activities suggested there is a **large heterogeneity** among youth organisations in regard to their capacity to secure funding for their activities. They have different levels of stability, financial regimes, relations with the government and agendas (e.g., provision of social services, advocacy etc) and face different financial challenges. Some rely on stable funding from state authorities or private donors; some are large, well established and more resilient. Yet, according to participants, grass-root organisations, those that are more recent or which represent minority groups, face more financial difficulties.

Participants welcomed the provisional agreement for a substantial **increase of the budget of the new Erasmus+ programme** for the period 2021-2027. They appreciated this would enable a greater focus on inclusion, quality, creativity and innovation in youth participation.

Discussions on funding revolved not only in relation to the need for increased budgets. They touched upon issues related to the quality of these processes and the mechanisms to ensure that money is used with **transparency**, with **equity**, in ways that are true to the **mission of youth work** and based on **youth participation**. There was a strong agreement that in order to engage in advocacy work, youth organizations should be **free of political interference**. There was, yet, **no consensus** on how independence can be best ensured.

What issues matter most to young people within this topic?

Youth organisations always had a **high turnover** of staff and volunteers and thus, a short institutional memory. Many participants were concerned that the Covid-19 crisis will further

¹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work.

² The Council of the European Union (2017) ‘Council conclusions on smart youth work’. *Official Journal of the European Union*. C 418/2.

³ The report is accessible [here](#).

decline the quality of employment in youth work and in youth organisations. *Precarisation* was related to economic security, the amount and the type of funding for organisations. But it was also discussed in relation to the **legal status** and **social recognition** of the youth work occupation. The absence of social security coverage for youth workers and even the inexistence of the occupation in the official nomenclator were major concerns. Grant-based financial solutions were considered insufficiently predictable and unable to cover staff costs.

Many participants worried that **intermittent funding** poses limitations on organisations' capacity to plan and to engage young people in long-term democratic processes. The **drift from advocacy and activism to service provision** in order to comply with various grant requirements and for ensuring organisational survival, was considered a major deterrent to democratic participation. To participants, youth work is a critical consciousness builder which requires **ongoing support**. Thus, the **structures of participation need to be permanent** and with **wider outreach** in terms of location and in relation to groups of young people.

Opinions on the **entities providing financial support** for youth participation, varied during the Youth Dialogue activities. At stake, were the political strings attached to funding. At one end of the spectrum, a largely shared idea was that 'quality youth work has to be ensured by the national government' (Finnish Working Group Report). A distinct and transparent **public fund for youth initiatives** was largely endorsed. At times, debates over the local vs. national budgeting were held. Although the general tendency was to favour local, de-centralised funding decisions, several participants argued that national allocations are better placed for balancing inevitable regional discrepancies:

... centres should be set up and funded by the national initiative, not a regional one. Because poorer regions often do not have the finances to run these centres, and there is a risk that young people will lose the opportunity to participate in their activities. However, we didn't find a match on this topic during the discussions.

Slovakian Working Group report.

However, in order to ensure the political independence of youth spaces, a mechanism of direct European funding was proposed by participants in Hungary:

... these spaces should be independent, meaning that ideally, they would receive funding and professional advice from the EU, so that they do not depend on the current government of the country or on NGOs.

Hungarian National Working Group Report.

Often, participants were concerned that beneath the debates on funding, there are sometimes underlying legal pre-conditions that pose severe limitations. The elusive **legal recognition of youth work** as an occupation in some countries and the pending status of several **national laws on youth** were discussed.

Possible Actions and Measures

To participants, the **employment status of youth workers** needs to ensure predictability and thus, to allow for meaningful relations with young people to build up. They considered that funding should be wisely managed, in order to respond to the new demands on youth work in the Covid-19 context. Activities stressed there is a need for **additional support staff** (e.g., psychologists, social workers, mentors, specialists in linking education and disability etc.). There was a large consensus that such positions need to be financially supported on a continuous basis, in order to establish trust, to enable long term interventions and to convey a sense of stability in young people's lives:

this profession [youth work] must be well paid and prestigious because low salaries equal huge rotation/volatility. Youth centre workers should be very mature and able to advise youth organizations, policymakers, informal youth groups, etc.

Lithuanian Working Group Report.

During activities, a consensus was built around the idea that while all young people undergo a recent decrease in wellbeing, some are more disadvantaged than others. The International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYO) roundtable stressed that the pandemic had impacted on those who were most marginalised more strongly. Indeed, young participants argued that youth work needs to be more **proactive** in reaching the 'hard to reach' young people. This needs **additional financial efforts** and **equity in allocations**. Importantly, many participants demanded funding criteria that do not prioritize the **scale of change** at the expense of **meaningful, long-term interventions** with highly disadvantaged young people (e.g. long term support, mentoring etc). Hiring more young people in youth organisations was considered a sensible choice in order to expand the outreach solutions.

To many participants, the abrupt reliance on the internet during Covid-19, brought to the fore the need for **better prepared youth workers**. Further preparation was considered needed in the area of **digital youth work**⁴ and in order to address young people's **emerging psychological needs**: social isolation, mental health issues (depressive states, anxiety, bullying, domestic violence etc). Better training of youth workers and volunteers in ways that protect from **secondary stress** and **burnout** was considered needed. These recent challenges call for the revision of previous financial priorities.

State **investments in infrastructure** were repeatedly referred to, in order to tackle the insufficient **physical spaces** and the **digital gap**. Thus, provision of free devices, availability of work-spaces with free internet access were often mentioned. Occasionally, the 'right to internet' was put forward. In addition, several solutions called for **complex investments and logistical arrangements** (e.g., mobile caravans to increase young people's capacity to organise in remote areas).

More **context-specific measures** were also mentioned. For instance, to revise the eligibility criteria that exclude from funding organisations doing online activities (Belgium, Flemish Community); the correction of the financial conditions for youth workers in Hungary, currently

⁴ For more discussions on digitalised youth work, see the *Report on Target 5: Ensuring Digitalised Youth Spaces*.

'underpaid and lacking social security'; **paid summer internships in public institutions**, a proposal from Spanish participants.

Whether funding should be **long term or based on short-term projects**, was a matter of debate. According to the majority of participants, long-term funding ensures sustainability, continuity of activities and a necessary predictability. For others, however, funding for short-term projects was preferable, as it allows new volunteers to experience/ experiment with social involvement without long term commitments (Lithuanian Working Group Report).

Several activities emphasised the value of **participatory budgeting** for local youth organisations: both for meeting relevant financial objectives and in relation to the process of democratic deliberation and decision-making. In addition, many participants expressed their need for funding requirements to be accessible and youth-friendly. The importance of supporting the **bottom-up, youth-led initiatives** was often raised, for instance by having informal groups eligible for (municipal) micro-funding (Bulgarian Working Group). More trainings of young people in project management, **friendlier and less bureaucratic funding procedures** were cross-cutting demands:

...one can change the criteria for various funds and thus support the involvement of young people to a greater extent. Part of the solution to getting young people more involved can thus lie in formal criteria funds and by making it easier to apply for support.

Denmark Working Group Report.

A general consensus was built around the idea that, in order to ensure youth participation, **financial support alone, does not suffice**. Invariably, discussions on funding intersected the continuing debates on the **recognition of youth work**. Participants noticed that the European Commission and Member States need to provide, besides funding, other resources, as well: support structures, such as **legislative framework, networks and training**; formal and political **recognition** of youth work and non-formal learning.