



Conclusions by the Working Groups

The Connecting Youth – Moving Forward EU-Western Balkans Youth Forum took place on 11-12 July 2017 in Trieste in the margins of the Western Balkans Summit. The youth forum constitutes a unique platform of exchange and dialogue, bringing together 130 young people, youth organisations, academia and decision makers from the Western Balkans and the EU Member States to discuss common challenges and work towards finding joint solutions. The event was organised by the European Commission and the Italian Government, supported by the European Youth Forum and the SALTO South East Europe Resource Centre.

The youth forum discussed the following horizontal themes relevant to the region: 1) the work of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), 2) the Young Civil Servants Scheme / Mobility of Young Professionals, 3) Erasmus+ programme, 4) Bridging the gap between youth policy, youth participation and parliamentarians in the region. In addition, the participants addressed in four working groups the following topics:

1. Mobility/ Exchanges;
2. Inclusion/ Overcoming of Stereotypes;
3. Entrepreneurship;
4. Youth Participation.

1. Mobility/ Exchanges

Mobility is an important theme for the Western Balkans region. It improves the skill sets of young people, brings young people together and increases cultural understanding. It facilitates the exchange of best practices to tackle the common challenges young people are facing. These discussions explored ways to increase access for everyone to various mobility opportunities and to remove obstacles for participation.

Conclusions of the participants

- We call upon local and national authorities to provide sustainable support for quality youth information in terms of outreach and accessibility, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups.
- We recommend that the European Commission and Western Balkans governments develop a mobility scheme for young workers from the Western Balkans to enable them to gain professional experience through traineeships and internships.
- We recommend that the European Commission and the Western Balkans governments broaden the joint degree programmes between – and within - the EU and the Western Balkans in order to encourage intra-regional student mobility.

2. Inclusion / Overcoming of Stereotypes

Inclusion of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups is an important aspect of youth empowerment in the region. Young people with fewer opportunities have less influential social networks, are less active in political life and are more likely to be unemployed. These divides undermine the social fabric and sustainable long-term economic growth. All young people deserve fair and equal opportunities; this will require long-term vision and engagement. Promoting equal opportunities for personal development and active participation in society will help decrease the number of socially excluded young people.

Conclusions of the participants

- We recommend that national authorities and international regional organisations take concrete steps to strengthen the capacities of youth organisations working with vulnerable groups – in order to improve their sustainability, quality and impact – in particular by focusing on non-formal education, youth work and youth empowerment.
- We recommend strengthening the advocacy capacities towards public authorities of representatives of vulnerable groups, especially by raising awareness of existing programmes, such as Erasmus+. A bottom-up approach that implements structural dialogue between policy makers and representatives of vulnerable groups should result in concrete actions to tackle social exclusion.
- We recommend developing mechanisms and incentives to ensure the involvement of vulnerable groups in Erasmus+, in the process of development and monitoring of the Action Plans under Chapter 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights), in NGOs and National Youth Councils, and in leadership roles. Intercultural learning through non-formal and formal education, exchanges between schools within, and between, the Western Balkans and the EU, would also contribute to the development of employment skills.
- Enhanced support of independent media reporting, and public awareness-raising of topics related to non-discrimination and vulnerable groups, is vital.

3. Entrepreneurship

Youth entrepreneurship is an important tool to combat the high and persistent youth unemployment rates and social exclusion. It will also help stimulate innovation and youth empowerment.

Conclusions of the participants

- To support inclusive economic development in the region, we call for better promotion and integration of entrepreneurial learning as a key competence in all parts of education and training systems, and structured cooperation between education and business.
- We recommend that youth entrepreneurship is mainstreamed across all national policy areas in close cooperation with the private sector and that a South Eastern Europe (SEE) network of young entrepreneurs, ambassadors and mentors is created and supported.
- We recommend improved access to financial support through the creation of start-up investment funds, structured regional cooperation that creates innovative and sustainable mechanisms to promote investments, mentorships, etc., and systematic evaluation of outcomes to disseminate lessons learned and success stories across the region.

4. Participation

Voting turnout, membership in political parties, interest in politics and trust in political institutions show a decline, especially among young people. There is a growing belief among young people that formal political structures are not working. When voting does not seem to change anything, casting a ballot feels ineffective and disempowering. Faced with a political system that does not respond to their needs nor reflects their views, young people are trapped in a vicious circle of disengagement. When young people do not vote, politicians feel they can be ignored and policy reflects this. Exclusion of youth from decision-making rises and the legitimacy of our democracy is undermined.

Conclusions of the participants

- In order to empower young people through increasing their participation, we recommend introducing civic education in the school curriculum on a regular basis, providing tools for the development of critical thinking. Workshops based on methods of non-formal education are an effective practice for enhancing students' critical thinking.
- At present, institutions communicate insufficiently and inconsistently. To address miscommunication both between institutions and official actors, and between institutions and citizens, our recommendation is to create an informal group and/or a co-management body that follows the decision-making process. This body should ensure effective communication and open dialogue in order to co-design, discuss, evaluate and monitor youth policies at all levels in a transparent and efficient way.