# Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth

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# Youth mainstreaming

## *The international perspective*

Tomaž Deželan, Slađana Petković and Marti Taru

Pool of European Youth Researchers

June 2025

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective, with the aim of integrating the voices and interests of young people into institutions' processes and policies have become one of the most anticipated processes in the youth field. As a series of studies indicate, young people are increasingly alienated from institutional politics (e.g., Foa and Mounk 2019; Deželan 2023), and suffer from a disadvantaged position in the labour market and in relation to housing, mental health and other problems (e.g. Deželan 2017; Deželan and Moxon 2021). Youth mainstreaming and youth perspective initiatives give rise to hope and expectations, but also puts pressure on the authorities to make their structures and policies more youth-just, or fair in the Rawlsian sense (see Rawls 1971). With the underlying idea in the concept of youth rights – that young people are rights holders, have specific needs and should not be denied access to some of the rights they are entitled to because of their age – youth mainstreaming and youth perspective initiatives enable organisations that are aware of this to better recognise the needs of young people. This study aims to help organisations to find an appropriate framework for these initiatives, to avoid terminological traps, to understand the potential tools and mechanisms that facilitate youth mainstreaming and to identify the factors that support these processes.

To avoid terminological confusion, the study emphasises that proponents of these processes use the language of mainstreaming carefully and consistently. The terms "youth mainstreaming" and "integration of youth perspectives" should be used synonymously, and the term "youth perspectives" should be used exclusively in the plural, as a youth organisation interviewee for this study suggested. Youth voices are constituted through the participation and representation of young people and require their active engagement in addition to expert knowledge. From normalising the presence of young people and promoting partnership in policy making, including implementation, monitoring and evaluation, to integrating youth perspectives into sectors, processes, institutions and programmes beyond the traditional ones, the accumulated experience of implementing youth mainstreaming points to the importance of the participation and engagement of young people and the organisations they represent in decision-making or dialogue. Ultimately, the active participation of young people in these processes with the aim of promoting equity also empowers the young people who participate in them.

The study also emphasises the role of the enablers of a successful youth mainstreaming process based on the experiences of the organisations presented in this report. The political will of the leadership and the presence of high-level advocates are important, as are external incentives, the provision of financial and human resources, normative commitments at strategic level, cross-sectoral co-operation, favourable organisational norms and a culture of improvement, broad acceptance of youth rights, strong existing co-operation with youth and an evidence-based approach to youth in general and to youth mainstreaming. The tools commonly used to

implement the youth mainstreaming plan of individual organisations include regulatory impact assessments; co-management systems; youth coordinators and envoys; youth dialogues; cross-departmental coordination and coordinators; representative surveys; dashboards, indicators and indices; and analyses of various funds and programmes through a youth lens that provide relevant results.

The study concludes with the following recommendations to international organisations and clubs investing in youth equity:

- Refrain from creating new terms and definitions; stick to the existing ones and use them appropriately and consistently.
- Support the expansion of successful initiatives that incorporate youth perspectives into policy making and the sharing of knowledge about the benefits of these practices.
- Focus on co-designing policies and programmes through robust forms of youth participation and representation, and gather evidence on the impact of these measures.
- Invest in the role of youth coordinators (coordinator, envoy, focal point, etc.) to strengthen cross-sectoral co-operation, and to promote awareness raising and dissemination of knowledge about mainstreaming efforts and successes.
- Identify change agents among high-level figures to prioritise mainstreaming and promote willingness to engage in the process.
- Link youth mainstreaming to the values and professionalism of the organisation, and invest in capacity-building activities to reinforce these values.
- Develop practical and immediately applicable tools that can support decision-makers in their actions (e.g. guidelines).
- Organise and/or support networks of professionals and supporters of youth mainstreaming.
- Build partnerships between young people and the organisations and institutions that represent them in order to overcome stereotypes and build trust.

# 1. INTRODUCTION – Rationale and approach to the study

Youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective have increasingly taken centre stage in the youth policy agenda of the European Commission and the Council of Europe. In early 2024, the [European Commission announced](#) that it was implementing a "youth check", which it launched in January 2025. Initiatives such as this have become the focus of discussions at various levels with partner institutions, youth organisations and the member states.

There are many reasons for introducing youth mainstreaming or youth perspective initiatives, which can be positive as well as negative (e.g. tokenism) and even contradictory.[1] The problems young people face, including their exclusion from institutional politics, the labour market and security-related issues, have moved onto the political agenda at the local, national and international levels. The responses of governments, authorities, private actors and civil society organisations differ because of different target groups within the population of young people as well as policy fields, with the rights-based approach to youth and their problems dominating in the policies and practices of many organisations (see Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)7; Hess and Stošić 2021; Kemper 2005: 6; UNFPA 2019). The underlying idea is based on the understanding that young people are rights-holders, have specific needs and should not be denied access to some of the rights granted to them because of their age.

There are also reasons beyond human rights and democracy that can justify the benefits of youth mainstreaming and perspective initiatives. For example, even if the moral obligation to address the needs of young people is not at the forefront of an organisation's actions, the benefit of addressing the needs of young people lies in their being both an economic and a socio-political force. They can be seen as decision makers and consequently as holders of resources in the market and organisations. However, the political consequence of ignoring the interests of young people in the marketplace of ideas and world views could be devastating because, as a social and political force, young people can contribute to both strengthening and eroding democratic societies.

Youth mainstreaming and the youth perspective can be also understood as an inclusive practice, although inclusion implies a power relationship. Mainstreaming and youth perspective should therefore offer young people the opportunity to make their voices heard, to participate voluntarily and purposefully in this process, and to be seen and understood, and consequently empowered. These initiatives, in effect, shift the focus from the consequences of discriminatory practices to their causes, and allow the injustice caused or reinforced by policy to be pre-empted

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[1] There have been similar attempts at both institutional and systemic levels which, rather than addressing the concerns of children and young people, have tokenised and silenced them (see Hart 1992).

and corrected (Barnett Donaghy 2004: 394). Although the inclusion of young people and their voices in policy making has long been a key priority of the youth sector, a systematic overview of practices and programmes at the local, national and international levels has yet to be established.

Within the 2024-25 work plan, the Youth Partnership provides for the further development of research, analysis and recommendations for respective partner institutions on youth perspectives/mainstreaming as part of the youth policy pillar. In this context, several research initiatives have been launched, including one to analyse the approach to youth perspective and youth mainstreaming in international organisations, including the Council of Europe, the European Union/European Commission (EU/EC), the Economic and Social Committee of the EU (EESC), the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The benefit of such an overview is to create a better understanding of the opportunities, challenges and impact of youth-centred policy development, and to identify the practice approaches and standards of international organisations, including their relevance and strengths and the challenges involved. It is hoped that the lessons learned from international perspectives, among others, will inspire new synergies and add to the future development of knowledge on this topic.

The most relevant international organisations included in the above overview operate in a constantly evolving geopolitical, technological and demographic context. These and other global factors continually challenge and shape the governance of the organisations, which have had to adapt to crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, demographic shifts, geopolitical transformations and rapid technological advancements in areas such as energy production and consumption, big data technologies, communications and social media. The list is neither definitive nor exhaustive but illustrates some of the large-scale dynamics that frame countries and organisations. To continue to work effectively for their members, these organisations have had to create collaborative networks, ensure stakeholder participation, build knowledge bases and develop good practices, act as knowledge brokers and devise (soft) rules and regulations to foster cross-sectoral co-operation. Another key function of these organisations has been to set standards to support their member states and to serve as role models in governance and policy development.

It is essential that they both adapt and lead the way in a rapidly changing world. The practices they have adopted and developed provide their members with a structured framework within which to stay informed and responsive. Of course, this process evolves over time in line with changes in the environment and the needs of members. Its role, which is not rigid nor fixed, is to respond to pressing global challenges according to the specific context. Similarly, governance

solutions are best viewed as particular to the needs and circumstances of the moment rather than as universal.

This study has used a range of data collection and analysis techniques to examine the views of international organisations and relevant stakeholders on youth mainstreaming and youth perspective, from traditional desk research to basic qualitative research. These include:

- reviewing available institutional documentation on the processes (websites, annual reports, special reports, studies, preparatory materials for various initiatives, agenda items and minutes of internal bodies[2]);
- studying scientific and professional publications, Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) publications and external studies (e.g. Deželan 2024; 2025);
- conducting and analysing a series of in-depth interviews with representatives and former staff of selected institutions (EC, EESC, OSCE, Commonwealth Secretariat), interviews with relevant stakeholders (European Youth Forum), and with representatives of the UN and the OECD;
- (active) participation as experts and external observers in relevant events, and diligently taking notes on the dynamics and content of these processes (e.g. Council of Europe consultation meeting on the preparation of a Council of Europe reference framework for the integration of a youth perspective).

## 2. OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS' EFFORTS IN THE FIELD

### 2.1 Council of Europe

The Council of Europe has firmly integrated the youth perspective in its activities by establishing the Youth Department, currently part of the Directorate for Democratic Participation within its Directorate General for Democracy and Human Dignity which implements the Youth Sector Strategy 2030. The European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) brings together representatives of the ministries or bodies responsible for youth issues from the 50 states that

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[2] For example, Draft concept note and programme prepared for the Consultative meeting preparing a Council of Europe Reference framework for the integration of a youth perspective, Extracts from the mapping of relevant intergovernmental Committees set up by the Committee of Ministers for 2024-27 and recent results of their integration of a youth perspective with future possible initiatives, Joint Council on Youth Roadmap proposed for preparation of the draft Reference Framework for the integration of a Youth Perspective, CMJ's Draft annotated table of content, Draft Policy Paper on the Council of Europe youth perspective, Reference framework on the Council of Europe youth perspective (50th meeting), CMJ's Elements for a Council of Europe reference framework for a youth perspective (49th meeting).

are parties to the European Cultural Convention. It promotes co-operation in the youth field between governments, and provides a framework for the comparison of national youth policies, the exchange of best practices and the drafting of standardising texts. The Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ), which consists of 30 representatives of non-governmental youth organisations and networks, provides opinions and input from youth NGOs on all youth sector activities, and ensures that young people are involved in its other activities. These two bodies are brought together in the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) and the Programming Committee on Youth (CPJ), which act as co-decision bodies. The Council of Europe's youth practice includes the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest, which are permanent structures for implementing the Council of Europe's youth policy. The European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe, with its annual budget of around €3.7 million, provides financial and educational support for European youth activities.[3]

Recently, the practices and operations of the Council of Europe have shifted toward integrating the perspectives of young people into all areas of its work. This shift ensures that the views, opinions, and experiences of young people are now being actively considered in decision-making processes about Europe's future. The push for greater youth engagement culminated at the Council of Europe Summit in Reykjavik in May 2023, where young people demanded a say in setting the summit's agenda and in the summit itself, arguing that "youthless politics is useless politics". Although no youth representatives attended the actual summit, the Reykjavik Declaration recognised young people as important actors and equal partners in shaping the future of Europe (Council of Europe 2023b). The declaration called for the inclusion of the youth perspective in the Council of Europe's intergovernmental and other deliberations. This has led to a dynamic debate across the institution on how best to involve young people in discussions on a wide range of issues, from bioethics to the prevention of torture and gender-based violence. The youth perspective is about more than just ensuring that young people are represented in decision-making bodies. It recognises that young people have unique perspectives and experiences that can contribute to the development of better policies. It is not about replacing representative democracy but about ensuring that young people have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

**2.2 European Union**

The history of youth involvement in policy processes in the EU dates back to 1999, when the Council Resolution of 8 February 1999 on youth participation called on the Commission to focus on the interests of young people as a guiding principle for action in all relevant policy areas and, where appropriate, to assess the possible impact of measures to be taken at the community level on the living conditions of young people and to identify ways and means of taking account of

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[3] See https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/european-youth-foundation1.

young people's interests. Youth mainstreaming has its roots in the [2001 White Paper on a new impetus for European youth](#), which laid the foundations for European governance in the youth field. A cross-sectoral approach has been pursued as a fundamental basis for effective EU youth policy over the years because it guarantees a say for young people in all the policy areas that potentially affect them (Council of the European Union 2018).

[The Council conclusions](#) adopted in November 2023 on promoting youth mainstreaming in policy-making processes in the European Union (Council of the European Union 2023) define it as

> an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people in the processes of policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as in decision-making processes. Mainstreaming ensures that the challenges and concerns inherent to young people are not addressed in isolation but are integrated cross-cuttingly into broader policy frameworks. (Council of the European Union 2023: n. 1)

Mainstreaming youth and youth participation continue to be foundational principles of [the EU Youth Strategy for 2019-27](#) which formally called on the Commission and member states to put mechanisms in place to involve young people in the development of policies that affect their lives. Recognising that decisions in various policy areas have a long-term impact on young Europeans, who are insufficiently represented in decision-making structures, the strategy calls on European and national authorities to implement processes that involve young citizens and the organisations that represent their interests in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies. Supported by instruments such as [the EU Youth Dialogue](#) and [EU youth programmes](#) (Erasmus+ and the EU Solidarity Corps), the strategy highlights that the specific needs of young people in envisaged policies or programs can be taken into account only by mainstreaming youth as a priority (Council of the European Union 2018). The strategy introduced the EU Youth Coordinator as a new and key mainstreaming instrument in pursuit of this goal.

The Commission uses a comprehensive set of regulatory and policy tools to assess the consequences of legislation for young people across different policy fields and to support youth mainstreaming, including [principles and regulations](#), "youth check" (which replaced the youth impact assessment), various evaluations, stakeholder consultations and instruments of co-operation and dialogue. The latter include open method of coordination, structured dialogue with young people and their organisations, researchers in the youth field and policy makers).

Over the years, the effective inclusion of young people's views and interests in decision making has become very important in the youth policy field. At [the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), all voting parties were in favour of giving young people more influence in policy-making

processes. In the annex to its communication *Conference on the Future of Europe – Putting vision into concrete action*, the Commission declares its commitment to a "coherent and meaningful approach to ensure the involvement of youth in policymaking, through their systematic participation in citizens' panels, in smaller deliberative co-creation processes and by paying particular attention to the impact of planned policies on the young generation".

The European Year of Youth 2022 established youth participation as a central priority of EU action in the field of youth, reflecting young people's demand that a youth perspective be integrated into relevant EU policies. Building on the legacy of the European Year of Youth, the Commission has introduced a "youth check" mechanism to assess the impact of EU policies on young people during the design phase, which ensures that youth needs and perspectives are integrated from the beginning (see below).

Following the communication on the European Year of Youth, Youth Policy Dialogues have been designed to strengthen the voice of Europe's youth in shaping the policies that affect their lives. These policy dialogues provide opportunities for young people to have direct and meaningful interactions with European commissioners, on an annual basis, on the policy initiatives the Commission is preparing. Youth mainstreaming was also one of the key fields of action of the European Year of Youth. In addition, a President's Youth Advisory Board is to be set up to advise on issues that matter to young people and to provide feedback on ideas and initiatives developed by the Commission.

2.2.1 European Economic and Social Committee

Youth engagement in the EESC is one of its civil society initiatives. The EESC has been looking at how it can better integrate the views of young Europeans into its work and the EU decision-making process. Some of the recent initiatives in this direction were the EESC's opinions about structured youth engagement on climate and sustainability in the EU decision making and about the European Year of Youth 2022, the resolution on the legacy of the European Year of Youth. The EESC has been organising the youth event Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS) since 2010.

In September 2022, the EESC adopted the opinion of the EU Youth Test, making it the first EU institution to commit to its implementation. As a result, in July 2023, the EESC Bureau set up an EESC Youth Group (an ad hoc group on youth engagement in the EESC) and launched a pilot project to implement the EU Youth Test in the opinion-forming process. In April 2024, the EESC Bureau approved the methodology for applying the EU Youth Test, which provides for youth representatives to work together with EESC members during the drafting of selected EESC opinions. The methodology was developed by the EESC Youth Group established in 2023. These developments show that the EESC, as one of the EU's constitutional institutions, has increasingly

prioritised youth voices in recent years, especially since the early 2020s. Today, youth engagement in the EESC has become an integral part of the organisation's work.

**2.3 The United Nations**[4]

Working with young people as partners is at the core of the mandate of the UN Youth Office[5] ([General Assembly Resolution 76/306](#)). The concept of "meaningful youth engagement", including its core guiding principles, is also outlined in the [secretary-general's policy brief on meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes](#) (2023).

With a cross-cutting mandate to promote the work with and for youth across all pillars of the United Nations (i.e. sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and humanitarian action), the UN Youth Office at the system level is guided in its work by the [UN system-wide youth strategy, Youth 2030](#). Launched by the UN Secretary-General on 24 September 2018, Youth 2030 acknowledges the pivotal role of young people in fostering sustainable, inclusive and peaceful societies globally and the importance of strengthening meaningful youth engagement in policy-making and decision-making processes, including at the UN. The strategy envisions a world where every young person's human rights are realised, which will empower them to reach their full potential and acknowledge their resilience and positive contributions as agents of change. The UN takes a mainstreaming approach to reach the Youth 2030 strategic goal of strengthening meaningful youth engagement, participation and advocacy, and amplifying youth voices for the promotion of a peaceful, just and sustainable world. It implies

> incorporating across all entities of the UN and work relating to all UN pillars, the need to meaningfully and sustainably engage and partner with young people and their organizations, networks, and movements, through formal and informal mechanisms and platforms to realize universal rights-based youth participation. (UN 2018: 10)

As part of the Youth2030 reporting and monitoring process, participating UN country teams and UN entities report on key performance indicators on meaningful youth engagement, that is, working with youth in various aspects of the work. Examples of [good practice](#) from the UN system's work with and for youth can be drawn from Youth2030 (i.e. [Scorecard](#)).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) highlights another important aspect of mainstreaming and emphasises the importance of young people's agency, empowerment and again participation as essential to society. The empowerment of young

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[4] This section is based on the kind contribution and inputs from the UN Youth Office, New York.
[5] On 8 September 2022, the General Assembly adopted resolution [A/RES/76/306](#) on the establishment of the United Nations Youth Office as a dedicated office for youth affairs in the Secretariat, integrating the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. This decision followed a recommendation to that effect in the 2021 report of the Secretary-General entitled "Our Common Agenda" ([A/75/982](#)).

people will ensure their full participation as equal and valuable partners in society, given that young people are not only subjects for whom various actions and activities are carried out but also agents and actors with whom actions and activities should be envisaged and implemented.

To protect and promote the rights of young people and support their civic and political engagement, the UN will mainstream human rights, that is**:**

> promote the mainstreaming of all rights of young people (including their right to participate in public affairs) into the work of treaty bodies, special procedures and other human rights mechanisms, and highlight the importance of protecting young human rights defenders and their organizations. (UN 2018: 14)

**2.4 The Commonwealth Secretariat**[6]

A particular feature of the Commonwealth is its focus on youth, both in terms of youth work as one of its focal issues and in integrating young people and youth representatives into the work of the organisation at all levels since its inception in 1964. At the highest political level, the Commonwealth Secretariat convenes a [Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting](#) every four years, which has included a Youth Leaders Forum and a Stakeholders Forum since 1992. The Commonwealth has presented the Commonwealth Youth Awards for Excellence in Development Work since 2012 to recognise the contribution of young people to achieving global development goals; the Youth Worker Awards since 2013; Youth Work Week, a celebration of the achievements of youth workers and young people, since 2012 (since 1993 in the UK); and a blog showcasing the youth perspective of Your Commonwealth. In February 2023, 13 youth networks and 8 working groups were active.

The Commonwealth has a long history of youth involvement in the organisation. The integration of youth in the work of the organisation has developed gradually, reaching new heights in the 2010s when targeted youth actions and organisational structures were established. The voice of youth in the Commonwealth has been and continues to be taken into account.

The [Commonwealth Youth Programme](#) follows a definition of youth mainstreaming that merely indicates the targeted population:

> The process of assessing the implications (for youth) of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making (youth) concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes, in all political, economic and social spheres so that (youth) benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008: 3)

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[6] See [https://thecommonwealth.org/about-us](https://thecommonwealth.org/about-us).

**2.5 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development**

As part of its work, the OECD has addressed issues of the education, employment, unemployment and social inclusion of young people worldwide. Especially after the 2008–9 economic and financial crisis, young people have become the focus of social policy. At their meeting in May 2013, OECD ministers agreed to enact a comprehensive series of measures in response to the recession, which are set out in [the OECD Action Plan for Youth](#). [The OECD Youth Stocktaking Report 2018](#) was the first report to take stock of existing public governance arrangements for effective and inclusive youth engagement and empowerment. It drew on the OECD's findings in the areas of open government, gender equality, public sector innovation, public budgeting, regulatory policy and other areas. In 2020, the OECD published the [Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice](#) report, which emphasises the need to include youth in governance.

However, institutionalised youth participation in the work and governance of the organisation has existed only since 2021. [Youthwise, the OECD Youth Advisory Board](#), was established in 2021 with a dual mission: to promote a better understanding of international policy making and the work of the OECD among young people, and to bring the valuable perspectives and ideas of youth to the OECD. Youthwise is made up of young people aged 18 to 30 from diverse backgrounds such as artificial intelligence, education, environment, technology, gender equality, health and social care, law, politics, climate, natural sciences, social mobility and beyond.

[The Council Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People](#), adopted by OECD members in 2022, further emphasises the need to promote young people's social inclusion and well-being beyond economic outcomes, with measures targeting young people in vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances. The recommendation sets out common policy principles and standards across various areas, from education to employment, well-being, participation in public life and public governance. Youth mainstreaming is seen as an approach to policy making that systematically considers young people's needs and concerns across all relevant policy and service areas, and broadens policy-making processes beyond the adult-by-default perspective. The OECD Youth Recommendation (2022), as an international legal instrument guides countries in the implementation of youth mainstreaming by providing policy standards on four key areas for youth mainstreaming:

- the collection and use of age-disaggregated data and evidence;
- the promotion of integrated approaches to youth policy making and service delivery;
- the strengthening of meaningful youth participation in decision making;
- the application of public management tools to anticipate the impact of rule making and budgeting on young people (e.g. regulatory/budgetary impact assessments).

Nevertheless, data from the [2023 OECD Trust Survey](#) highlight that young people continue to express lower trust in government than older age groups (36% among young people v. 43% among those aged 50+). OECD data also point to important challenges faced by young people in the areas of skills, employment, and mental health. These data continue to underline the importance of promoting more inclusive policies for young people across policy areas that align with the objective of youth mainstreaming approaches.

[The OECD Youth Policy Toolkit](#), launched in November 2024, helps policy makers implement the OECD Youth Recommendation by providing practical guidance and good practices for members in designing and executing policies that address the unique challenges young people face in areas of education and skills; employment and entrepreneurship; health; social inclusion; participation and representation in public life; and public governance and intergenerational justice.

## 2.6 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

The voice of youth is represented in the OSCE at the highest level by the institution of the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for Youth. The main task of the Chairperson-in-Office is to take a leading role in conflict prevention, resolution and rehabilitation in the OSCE region, to liaise directly with the parties concerned and to arrange or conduct settlement negotiations.

The OSCE defines youth mainstreaming as "a strategic approach to systematically and meaningfully integrate youth perspectives in different dimensions of security" (Hess and Stošić 2021). It follows a comprehensive youth-responsive approach by 1) engaging young women and men in policy discussions and programmatic processes; 2) responding to the needs of youth and taking them into consideration in any area and stage of a policy or project; and 3) assessing the impact on young people of any planned action (ibid.).

Youth participation in the organisation's functioning was institutionalised during the 2014 Switzerland's leadership when the model OSCE project was launched, where one representative aged 18 to 30, from each OSCE country – so-called youth ambassadors – participated in OSCE work simulations.

The Swiss initiative was noted by other member states, and at the end of 2014 the Ministerial Council adopted a [Declaration on Youth](#), which recognises the potential of young people to contribute to their countries' economic, political and social development and to support them in implementing commitments in the OSCE key areas. The Ministerial Council has so far adopted only three decisions on youth – in 2014, 2015 and 2018 – which makes this a significant event.

The OSCE believes that youth can contribute to many areas of OSCE activities, including peace and security, activism and advocacy, energy and sustainability, inclusion and education. Young people are involved in a range of the organisation's initiatives and activities, including strengthening security, democratic institutions, integration of national minorities and supporting media freedom. Young people also participate in the programmes of local OSCE missions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia.

Youth are seen as contributing to peace-related issues and activities beyond security, in the broader sense of creating and maintaining the social and political conditions for peace and co-operation. The voice of youth has been growing in influence over the last 10 years.

## 2.7 Multidimensional framework of youth mainstreaming definitions

Various definitions of youth mainstreaming go back to the definition of gender mainstreaming in the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW), which emphasises that mainstreaming is a process that aims to achieve equality

> by assessing the impact of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy that aims to make the concerns and experiences of target groups an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that all groups benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. (UN 1997: 3)

Mainstreaming is therefore about equal participation in all areas of life. It is about ensuring equity and justice for people who belong to a particular group (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017: 3) and a matter of social justice (Monaheng Sefotho 2015: 1). It aims to promote the equity perspective throughout the policy-making process, from conception to implementation to review and all stages in between (Barnett Donaghy 2004: 393), and is a strategy that ultimately aims to ensure the implicit integration of different perspectives in various processes, institutions and policies (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008: 12). It points to a youth-responsive approach by involving young women and men in policy discussions and programmatic processes; being responsive to the needs of youth and taking them into account in every area and phase of a policy or project; and assessing the impact of a planned action on young people (Hess and Stošić 2021).

It can represent a commitment to mainstream young people by incorporating youth across all units and operations of an individual organisation through both formal and informal mechanisms (UN 2018: 10). Rather than focusing on the policy process and the political-administrative regulatory tools available to policy makers, some organisations (e.g. UNESCO) emphasise the importance of youth agency and empowerment as a prerequisite for a desired society.

Empowering young people thus ensures and strengthens their full participation as equal and valuable partners, especially since young people are not only subjects for whom various measures and activities are carried out, but also actors with whom programmes should be planned and implemented (UNESCO 2002).

The currently prevailing definition of youth mainstreaming in the Council Conclusions of the Spanish EU presidency, which explicitly mentions youth mainstreaming, recognises the need to include the youth perspective in the policy process, including decision making. It essentially advocates for youth representation but also warns against the common practice of isolating young people's challenges and concerns from other concerns (Council 2023: n. 1). Mainstreaming has an impact on policy processes that need to be developed and reorganised to include an equality perspective in all policy areas and at all levels (Council of Europe 1998). It presupposes that the concerns, visions and contributions of young people are fully taken into account by all ministries, departments and authorities, and by other institutions and organisations. This definition, therefore, also pushes for more comprehensive and better regulation that has an impact on policy through a cross-sectoral approach.

Youth mainstreaming is also about spotlighting young people and issues relevant to them for a wider (policy) audience, "meaning that this topic is a consideration on top of people's minds" (Sirakova, interview with the author 2024). As a representative of the European Youth Forum said, it is about

> going beyond the traditional areas where we already consider young people, for example, volunteering in education. However, these cross-sectoral areas [that do not address only young people], for example, housing or employment, in which young people have a very important stake, are rarely or less frequently included in discussions or policy development. (Papp, interview with the author 2024)

It is therefore about the recognition and normalisation of youth engagement in areas that impact their lives but have not necessarily been considered so far. Furthermore, youth mainstreaming is about creating a space that enables young people to contribute to outcomes, an approach or even a strategy to ensure youth-centred policies and policy outcomes (Robinson, interview with the author 2024). As the experiences of various organisations such as the Commonwealth Secretariat and the European Economic and Social Committee show, it is about "giving young people the opportunity to come to the table, to the decision makers' table, in a more systematic and robust way" (Repanšek, interview with the author 2024). It should be a deliberate initiative to involve young people in partnership in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes.

The conceptual framework of the analysed definitions of youth mainstreaming points to several core dimensions associated with the term. As such, they provide several features available to agencies committed to the cause:

- ensuring the participation and engagement of young people and the organisations that represent them in decision making or dialogue, including through the creation of venues that enable this;
- normalising the presence of young people and their representation in policy making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation;
- the principle of partnership or even co-management between young people and the organisation to collaborate in incorporating young people's views and priorities;
- the integration of youth perspectives into different policies and across different sectors, processes, institutions and programmes;
- the empowerment of young people through active engagement in the process and the goal of achieving equality rather than perpetuating inequality.

# 3. YOUTH MAINSTREAMING AND YOUTH PERSPECTIVES DEBATE

## 3.1 Common grounds of mainstreaming versus perspectives debate

The definitions of youth mainstreaming refer to the importance of considering the position of young people, but different international organisations deal with this differently. The original UNCSW definition refers to the relevance of the concerns and experiences of the target groups, in this case young people, as an integral dimension of policy making (UN 1997). It thus refers to the relevance of available data on the target group, as well as to a representation based on the experiences gathered during the process of transition to adulthood. The same formulation, which refers directly to youth, can also be found in the Commonwealth Secretariat's view on the importance of "making (youth) concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes" (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008: 3).

The OSCE definition, in contrast, uses the umbrella term "perspectives" for the various concerns, experiences and needs, with the systematic and meaningful integration of "youth perspectives" in different dimensions of security (Hess and Stošić 2021). It focuses on the importance of the processes that reveal these perspectives, thus emphasising the relevance of representation. Moreover, perspectives point to the views based on accumulated experiences rather than the needs and concerns to be addressed for young people. In this way, "perspectives" also demonstrate agency and a move away from passively accepting the support offered by others. Perspectives also indicate plurality and not just one perspective in relation to young people. This is not emphasised in the definition of the Council of the EU, which uses a single rather than a plural perspective on young people and additionally emphasises the needs young people have.

With "an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people" (Council of the EU 2023: n. 1), the Council points to a rather narrow view of "perspective", usually obtained through representation and excluding the needs identified from other forms of data that allow for greater generalisations (e.g. surveys, official statistics). As noted by the EU Youth Coordinator, the perspective is more

> the voice of young people, what are they telling us; their ideas, recommendations. But there is another form of information which is more in a way of expressing youth needs or challenges, things that may have emerged from other data. (Sirakova, interview with the author 2024)

At the same time, the perspectives are in practice broader than what young people tell the EU's institutions and they contain indications of important trends. The insights (i.e. needs) come not only from young people but also from youth workers, youth researchers and others. Perspectives are broader than the youth voice because policy makers need to track a range of insights about youth perceptions, concerns and needs and to use this knowledge to inform the design of new policies, regardless of the policy area (Sirakova, interview with the author 2024). In practice, this means setting up procedures (e.g. inter-ministerial committees, inter-ministerial coordination groups, youth focal points) to ensure that youth priorities are integrated into all policy areas (European Commission 2024b: 7).

The Council of Europe focuses more on the "meaningfulness" of youth participation that recognises the contribution of young people and goes beyond the participation of young people in policy making. All definitions of youth perspectives include participation as one of its core components but also go beyond the "participation plus" approach, where the case is not merely to improve youth participation. The Council of Europe devotes a lot of attention to its meaningfulness (see Barta et al. 2021) and the youth-centred nature of policy and the capacity of young people to act on an individual and collective level: "we need to make sure young voices are heard too. … It is not just about young people being involved in certain policies; it is about recognising their views, opinions, and experiences as crucial for shaping our future together" (Flessenkemper in Bergholtz 2024).
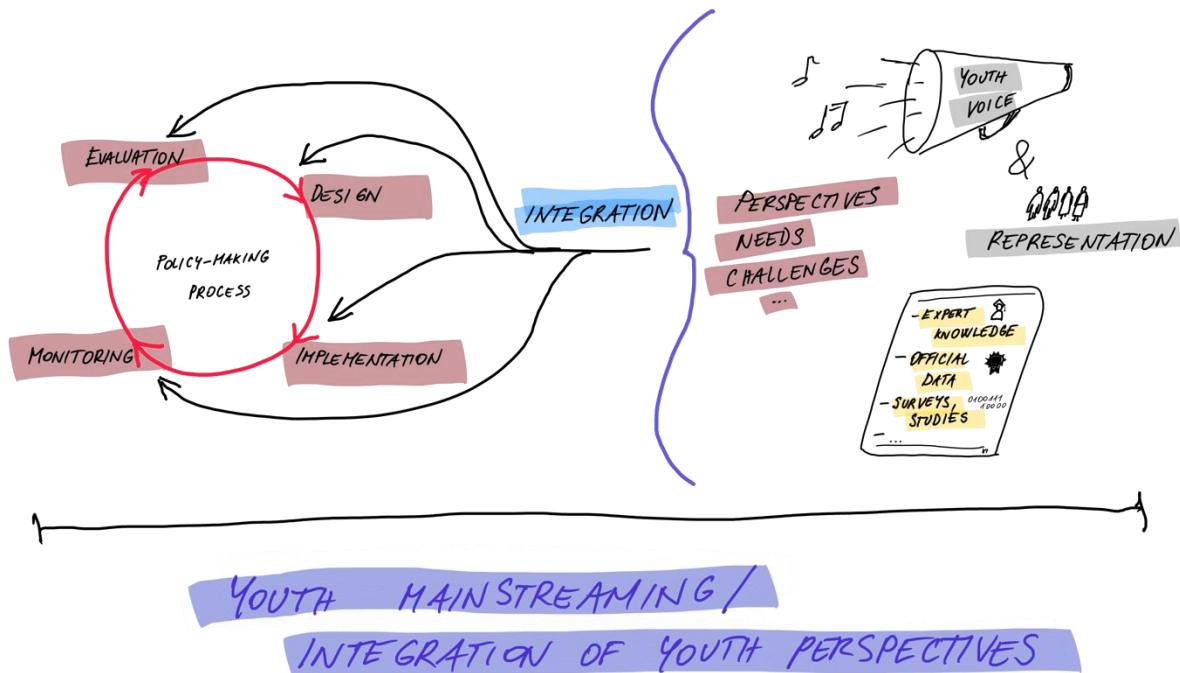
In addition to the plural nature of the perspectives, which encompass a variety of opinions, views and experiences of young people, there is a strong indication by the Council of Europe of the favoured model of generating youth perspectives through the meaningful participation of young people, where young people's voices are heard and accompanied by the data generated through a variety of supporting methods:

> The best way to generate youth perspectives is really that young people are placed at the centre of deliberations and negotiations – physically present – through meaningful youth participation. …there is a need to generate evidence, statistics and various sets of data, and to gather information. The Council of Europe has many instruments to move ahead with this, through participation, consultation, research, studies, opinion polling, exchanges and so on. (Flessenkemper in Bergholtz 2024)

With consistent and careful use of the existing terms already used by relevant institutions, it is possible to construct a coherent empirical picture of the terminology used in the processes of the observed institutions (see figure 1). While this raises some conceptual questions about the theoretical relevance of these terms for existing theories (e.g. feminist standpoint theory, child-

and youth-focused voice theory), it is useful for improving conceptual clarity among policy makers and their audiences, who often deal with many international organisations on the same topic at the same time.

**Figure 1: Empirical links between youth mainstreaming and youth perspectives**



If the following conditions are met, the discussion on youth perspectives and youth mainstreaming can go further to focus on its purpose, content and mechanisms; its achievements and impact; and its ultimate goal:

- the terms "youth mainstreaming" and "integration of youth perspectives" are used synonymously:
- the term "youth perspectives" is used exclusively in the plural; and
- youth voices are constituted through elements of participation and representation and require a level of active engagement of the target group that goes beyond the knowledge of experts in the field and available data (e.g. official statistics, opinion polls).

## 3.2 Utility of the youth mainstreaming and youth perspective(s) debate

The general discussion on youth perspectives, although sometimes terminologically challenging and contradictory, is also a useful exercise because it shows a willingness to understand how youth perspectives can be brought into policy areas (Papp, interview with the author 2024), how

they are constructed (Flessenkemper in Bergholtz 2024), and how they reflect on the role of different stakeholders, including youth organisations, in this process and, of course, open up the question of youth representation outside organisations.

Another important element of the debate on youth perspectives is its potential for futureproofing or at least how it gives us a unique view of future development. What is different about youth perspectives, compared to those perspectives of older people or others, is that they tend to reflect a more sustainable approach, not only for these generations of young people when they grow up but also for future generations. As expert knowledge forms an important part of the infrastructure of the youth perspectives, including statistical trends and other solid data, the forward-looking dimension of youth perspectives is best suited to ensure this potential. Papp (2024) argues that "when you include experts and organised civil society, the perspectives of future generations are there … [since] they have historical data, they see trends … and can interpret them".

This is about transformative and proactive processes that include the capabilities and rights of young women and men alongside those of other marginalised and non-marginalised members in community development planning. They are transformative because they radically improve the well-being and rights of young people (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017: 3). They can also be considered a fundamental human right because they can be seen as strategies for intergenerational equity and justice that enable young people's capabilities, participation and human rights to be an integral part of the analysis, design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in cross-sectoral planning in all social, political and economic spheres (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008). Some organisations are particularly well placed to adopt this view, especially as their remit is firmly focused on development policy. Youth perspectives can thus also mean looking at development, planning and thinking through a youth lens (Robinson, interview with the author 2024). The role of the wider youth sector in this is crucial as it has a particular way of seeing the world: "They see the world through their own eyes. And therefore, they can respond to, relate to or contribute to discourses and development thinking and planning from these perspectives" (Robinson, interview with the author 2024).

Youth mainstreaming and youth perspectives narratives represent a strategic step towards planning the future that implies action, as it requires collaboration, alliances and coordination and translates the group issues into the common stream of thought. They are a vision in which people of all ages participate in and benefit from equally, which enables young people to achieve a social, political and economic status equal to that of adults (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017: 4). They enable young people and adults alike to benefit from and contribute to development

outcomes equally (Hess and Stošić 2021: 28) by involving young people in the process of finding solutions and implementation (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008: 1).

## 4. TOOLS AND ENABLERS OF YOUTH MAINSTREAMING AND YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

### 4.1 Enablers of youth mainstreaming / integration of youth perspectives processes

Every youth mainstreaming process and process of integrating youth perspectives is special, has its own reasons and specific objectives, and is subject to numerous contextual factors. These can be both facilitating and hindering, and even in the same environment the same factors can have different effects in two very similar processes.

The political will of the organisation, especially its leadership, and the presence of high-level change agents within the organisation who are committed to the process and give it high priority, have proved to be one of the most important factors for the introduction and implementation of youth mainstreaming processes. This was made clear by the leaders of certain organisations (e.g. OSCE, EESC) that made the integration of the youth perspectives one of the most important commitments of their tenure (Deininger, interview with the author 2024; Repanšek, interview with the author 2024; Stošić interview with the author 2024). On a broader level, this was observed in the European Year of Youth and its legacy, as well as in the Council of Europe's Reykjavik Declaration (Council of Europe 2023b). The allocation of resources – human or financial – earmarked for youth mainstreaming demonstrates the commitment of the leadership and, if adequate, it is one of the key factors for impact (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008).

A crucial factor for the implementation of youth mainstreaming processes is also the involvement of key stakeholders in creating ownership of the process and its results and neutralising resistance within an organisation. This includes adequate stakeholder mapping and the development of tools for their involvement and contribution to the process. Decision makers are important stakeholders, as their commitment to the process is of immense political, policy and financial importance, and can play a crucial role in the success of mainstreaming. But the experience gained through the participation of young people is most important of all. The success of youth mainstreaming ultimately depends on the involvement of young people, because participatory and representative decision-making mechanisms require an appropriate level of involvement in decisions that affect their lives. Responsive institutions and a strong commitment from individuals and the civil society organisations representing them are prerequisites for successful youth mainstreaming. This means the direct participation of young people, the involvement of institutions with competences and interests in various youth-relevant policy

areas, and the involvement of organisations by and for young people, depending on the participation and representation model.

On a broader level, social norms and prevailing values (e.g. respect for dialogue, gender equality, tolerance) determine the fate of such youth-oriented mechanisms, but they are not alone. The relevant structural factors also include a commitment to non-discrimination, human rights and equality between people, a degree of transparency and of democratisation, and so on. The broad acceptance of the youth rights principle, which is based on human rights and aims at the social, political and economic equality of young women and men, is one of the most important factors for the successful integration of the youth perspectives into the life of an organisation. Through the goal of equity, youth rights should be clearly articulated and operationalised in the documents and mechanisms that govern the process. The normative commitments and concerns, as well as the evidence base, provide a solid foundation for successful mainstreaming practise (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017; Hess and Stošić 2021; OECD 2020) and point to a systemic and strategic approach to youth mainstreaming, which includes the need for continual application of the mechanism that must demonstrate positive outcomes and impact for young people in the setting in which the mechanism is used (e.g. organisation, sector, policy area). To track the performance of the youth mainstreaming mechanism, the strategic processes need to be adequately monitored and evaluated.

Organisational norms and culture play an important role in the acceptance or rejection of youth mainstreaming because the perception of young people as equal and the awareness of and resilience to discriminatory practices vary greatly from organisation to organisation, sometimes even from department to department within the same organisation. The existence of quality improvement mechanisms and an overall quality culture, the presence of capacity-building mechanisms as part of staff development policies, and a focus on positive social impact and the development of democratic mechanisms and culture within and outside the organisation have an important impact on the ability of organisations to integrate youth perspectives. Professionalism in general, and in the provision and collecting of data and experience in particular, is another key element in an adequate scientific representation of the observed processes (see UNDP 2021). This is also linked to cross-sectoral co-operation, which ensures that youth perspectives are integrated into different policies and areas at different levels. This prevents the functional differentiation of different subsystems and allows for the harmonisation of interventions through various mechanisms of cross-sectoral policy co-operation, including through the supportive role of youth coordinators and youth correspondents. As the EU Youth Coordinator performing these tasks notes:

People are working more across siloes in project teams, etc., where there is a lot more flow and exchange of ideas, this kind of environment is enabling for mainstreaming youth … It certainly seems that cross-sector co-operation is rather an enabling factor, somehow a precondition. (Sirakova, interview with the author 2024)

Probably the strongest driving force are the challenges young people face in different contexts and at different times. It may be the concerns they have (e.g. about the environment), a condition they live with (e.g. mental health and well-being) or the skills they have (e.g. basic skills) that could galvanise different stakeholders to respond and open up a space for greater integration of youth perspectives in policy making. But most of all, it is a response to broader crises that affect individuals other than young people and that go beyond traditional youth policies (youth employment, education, transitions). For example, the threats to security and youth radicalisation, especially after 2014, have clearly contributed to the greater integration of youth perspectives into security-oriented organisations (Deininger, interview with the author 2024; Stošić, interview with the author  2024). Focusing on the deteriorating conditions for young people as a result of different factors (e.g. Covid-19 pandemic) requires another important element, namely an evidence-based approach that allows the process to be data and outcome driven. This approach should be based on robust data collection and data analysis procedures that enable relevant stakeholders to assess the situation of young people using a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators. Data collection and analysis should be designed to enable action-oriented or participatory research into the targeted topics or areas by young people themselves, which will impact young people and their capacity to act, inform policy, democratise the process of data collection and aggregation, and strengthen ownership of the youth mainstreaming process. Evidence-based policy making that utilises age-disaggregated data can stimulate youth mainstreaming, as potentially different impacts than planned could extend the relevance of the youth perspectives beyond the boundaries of youth policy (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017; OECD 2020).

Another element that has a positive impact on the introduction of mainstreaming practises is that young people are becoming more visible and, in some ways, more vocal. Their new modes political engagement, without being limited to traditional targets of political action (i.e. political institutions) and working through non-traditional agents (individuals, influencers, opinion makers, non-formal initiatives) have allowed them to bypass their representative institutions and to raise their concerns directly on new platforms. Political institutions are very receptive to voices on such platforms, especially because of their impact on public perception and audience ratings, and so the concerns raised by young people lend weight to the argument for greater inclusion of youth perspectives.

On the basis of this overview, several enabling factors that organisations aiming to implement successful mainstreaming practises should ensure can be outlined. Ensuring that these factors are in place is not a guarantee of successful mainstreaming, but there is evidence that they have a positive impact on the position of young people in organisations and in policy making.

**Table 1: Checklist of enablers for successful mainstreaming practices**

| 1 | Political will of the leadership, presence of high-ranking mainstreaming advocates (e.g. secretary general, president) |
|---|---|
| 2 | Financial and human resources for youth mainstreaming |
| 3 | Organisational norms that uphold equality, non-discrimination and human rights |
| 4 | Broad acceptance of youth rights |
| 5 | Normative commitments and a strategic approach to youth mainstreaming |
| 6 | Established structures for cross-sectoral co-operation, especially with the youth target group |
| 7 | Active involvement of stakeholders, especially young people, in institutionalised participation and representation structures and processes |
| 8 | Participation of young people both within and outside organisations |
| 9 | Evidence-based approach (data collection, aggregation, feeding into regular decision making) |
| 10 | Robust internal quality improvement system |
| 11 | Evidence of the difficult situation of young people or sub-optimal treatment of young people by policies and/or organisations |
| 12 | Youth advocacy / pressure campaigns around organisations |

## 4.2 Tools of youth mainstreaming and the contexts guiding them

Youth mainstreaming is based on a clear awareness of the unequal and unfair position of young people in comparison to other population groups. However, being aware of the specific problem that youth mainstreaming aims to address is only a starting point for the process, and actors should not harbour unrealistic expectations. A basic set of agreed ideas underpinning youth mainstreaming is needed to address specific societal, sectoral, cultural and organisational contexts. Structures and processes should be created or strengthened on the basis of these ideas that incorporate youth perspectives, thus transforming political engagement into an institutionalised organisational process.

Youth mainstreaming is not only about including the capacities and interests of youth in sectoral policies and planning, but also about understanding how policies and sectors influence each

other in policy areas relevant to youth (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017). Youth mainstreaming is therefore a complex process that can be introduced at different levels and with different scopes. Such a design of youth mainstreaming corresponds to the policy architecture of modern states, in which sectoral policies and their structures converge at the executive level but can also be designed and implemented differently, depending on the level and sector. However, mainstreaming is most successful when efforts at different levels are systemically coordinated and integrated into different (development) strategies (see de Jong and Vijge 2021). This does not prevent certain sectors from being more and others less focused on youth agendas. Effective examples from one sector can spread across different levels and in different sectors (Papp, interview with the author 2024; Sirakova, interview with the author 2024), especially if the sectors have common structures and actors and/or the communication channels between them are robust (e.g. in education and employment). Positive examples can also lead to an all-governmental approach, as there are already reference processes from which to learn and be informed.

The issue of mainstreaming is multifaceted and involves elements of willingness, financial, organisational and human resources, and relevance to young people, at least contextually, in a particular field and at a particular time and place. Of course, all fields are relevant to young people, but some are more relevant than others at a particular time and place. Some fields have organisations with sufficient staff and budgets to provide evidence and knowledge and to make their voices heard, but others do not. In addition, some policy areas are gaining relevance because of external events, although they have not been a focus in the youth field for a long time (e.g. defence and security policy in Europe after the invasion of Ukraine, mental health and well-being during and after Covid-19). As a result, decisions about the forms of youth mainstreaming practices depend on resources, contextual relevance and proximity to the youth field. This is clear in the following statement:

> we take the relevance and if it's not that direct or if it's not that relevant for young people, then it's fine if you do not include a youth impact assessment, it's important to still do some kind of thinking around how it is relevant for young people, even indirectly. (Papp, interview with the author 2024)

In the context of these meta-dimensions of the integration of youth perspectives / youth mainstreaming processes, several tools have been shown to address the position of young people effectively. The first is the regulatory impact assessment in the field of youth, which provides information on the expected costs and benefits of a proposed regulation for young people (European Commission 2024). This ex ante assessment of the potential impact of proposed legislation systematically incorporates young people's perspectives into policy design,

particularly with respect to their equality with other groups, considering their gender and socio-economic position in addition to their age (OECD 2020). The tools that fall into this category have a decent history at national and sub-national levels and can also currently be seen in EU youth tests and checks, including the EU Youth Test pilot project of the EESC, the EU impact assessment tools developed under the Better Regulation framework, and the European Commission's youth check, which involves a multistage process of assessment of the relevance, possible consultation and impact (European Commission 2024b: 10). In addition to organised targeted discussions with young people and youth stakeholders, a Young Citizen Panel system, and potentially also the President's Youth Advisory Board announced by the European Commission, offer a good opportunity to bring the much needed voice of youth into the policy-making process.

The Council of Europe's co-management system is an example of the integration of youth perspectives in terms of participation and representation of young people. It is a place of joint reflection and co-production that gives young Europeans a voice, in the form of the Advisory Council on Youth, composed of 30 representatives of youth NGOs and networks, and interaction with the authorities responsible for youth issues meeting in the European Steering Committee for Youth. The Joint Council for Youth, as a co-management body, brings together the CCJ and the CDEJ in joint decisions on the priorities, programmes and budget of the youth sector and to implement the Youth Sector Strategy 2030. The co- management is limited to the youth sector and cannot be transferred to the work of other bodies of the organisation because of its regulatory framework. CCJ contributes primarily as a participant to the work of a number of the organisation's intergovernmental committees, may advise a committee or body on specific issues or deliverables at its invitation, and engages in informal exchanges of views with other bodies and structures of the organisation, which can lead to a diffusion of values and a resulting change in organisational culture, leading to a "soft" integration of youth perspectives across the organisation, as demonstrated by the Reykjavik Declaration process and related events (see Council of Europe 2023a).

The youth coordinator, who focuses on cross-sectoral co-operation and knowledge dispersion, recognises the importance of good communications with young people. Their role is to mainstream youth perspectives into all stages – design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation – of the policy-making process in the areas that affect young people's lives. The EU Youth Coordinator is responsible for facilitating a group of stakeholders and correspondents, promoting the integration of youth perspectives (including from the EU Youth Dialogue) into all relevant policies, strengthening co-operation between the different parts of the institution that deal with youth issues, and raising awareness of EU opportunities for young people (European Commission 2024c). A similar, albeit different, role is played by the youth envoy in the UN's Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, whose main tasks are to increase youth participation

in the intergovernmental space, harness the potential of young people within the UN system, and engage and mobilise young people (UN 2024).

The aforementioned dialogue with young people, which takes many forms and happens at various levels, offers another opportunity to promote youth perspectives. The EU Youth Dialogue, formerly known as Structured Dialogue, refers to the dialogue between young people and youth organisations and policy and decision makers, as well as experts, researchers ,and other relevant civil society actors. It serves as a forum for continual joint reflection and consultation on the priorities, implementation and follow-up of European co-operation in the youth field. It builds on the achievements of previous dialogue processes with the aim of involving more decision makers and young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, in decision-making processes and the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (EU 2024). In the past, the dialogue has generated both leverage and momentum for many policy instruments and initiatives (e.g. the European Youth Goals). However, youth dialogues are a tool for generating youth perspectives, while the actual integration of this form of youth engagement leads to a practice of mainstreaming: "There are different tools of mainstreaming. The youth dialogue can be a mainstreaming tool as well, if it manages to go beyond generating inputs" (Papp, interview with the author 2024).

An immensely important step in youth mainstreaming is the youth analysis, which examines the relevant policies, legislation, institutional settings, organisational environments and available programmes. This analysis also includes a situation analysis, where the internal and external environment is examined to understand the organisation's capabilities, target groups and operational environment with regard to youth. Youth analysis therefore necessarily involves the active participation of young people who provide insights into the context, institutions and processes, as well as being active researchers at different stages, of the research. Youth analysis provides a basis for identifying measures to address the problem and for planning and budgeting. In programme planning, policy needs to be translated into operational plans in collaboration with youth, including monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that are discussed with a wider group of stakeholders. The implementation phase relies on programmed and adequately budgeted plans, dedicated implementation structures coupled with participatory monitoring and evaluation, and appropriate sustainability commitments. Effective communication of the results of youth mainstreaming to external and internal stakeholders is also crucial for the sustainability of youth mainstreaming.

Institutional practice informs other sources of data, expertise and knowledge about young people that provide important information about youth perspectives. These include data from

various representative surveys (e.g. Youth Eurobarometer) that complement the voice of young people in civil society through their representative organisations. As these surveys represent the entire population of young people, including the vast majority of young people outside organisations, these data provide a strong reinforcement, or calibration, of the input of youth through other processes. Additional evidence is provided by various dashboards and indicators. These tools, particularly in some areas, sound the alarm when youth voices do not, and allow for an evidence-based response to issues uncovered through data collection and data analysis. Various youth indices serve a similar purpose.

Additional sources of relevant information on youth perspectives are the services used and/or research funded by other institutions working in the same field or dealing with at least some of the same issues (e.g. European Parliament, European Commission, OECD, Council of Europe, UN). This research, especially regular research on the condition and performance of young people, has wider benefits and provides information that can inform policy making. In addition, one-off research initiatives carried out under various non-youth-focused research programmes (e.g. Horizon 2020, ERC) provide valuable information for mainstreaming. An additional source of data is youth programmes, through either their evaluation or their meaningful programming; some of the strands are directly aimed at integrating youth perspectives into the policy-making process (e.g. Erasmus+ Key action 3, "Support to policy development and cooperation"; Structured/Youth Dialogue projects; European Youth Foundation projects). As the EU Youth Coordinator explains: "youth programmes are very important … because this is where we actually have funding to make it all happen" (Sirakova 2024).

Last but not least, national agencies and other fund operators (e.g. the European Youth Foundation) that manage the programmes financially provide important contextual insights and data on the initiatives that work well at street level. They also have the potential to be scaled up and broader policy relevance, especially as these structures operate with meta-knowledge that is beyond the reach of conventional youth-targeted surveys and is immensely valuable for programme designers (e.g. on absorption capacity of the sector). Youth mainstreaming design and the implementation processes of such programmes and development interventions are an excellent way to approach the integration of relevant perspectives from the outset and thus also outcomes aligned with youth perspectives (see examples from the Commonwealth Secretariat 2017; Hess and Stosić 2021).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding youth mainstreaming as a space where inclusion and representation are firmly established and can flourish, thus improving the position of young people, and considering the far-reaching benefits and strengths of this concept, one might expect an endless list of broad, bold attempts to implement youth mainstreaming in the hierarchical structures of a variety of institutions and organisations. Indeed, there are promising initiatives that (hopefully) incorporate the principles of youth mainstreaming, for example, the UN Programming Handbook on Youth, Peace and Security (UNFPA et al. 2021) and the EU Youth Strategy. In addition, young people are increasingly being called on as advisers on certain issues, especially those that are disproportionately relevant to young people, such as the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe, European Commission's Youth Sounding Board, and the UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change.

Few, if any, of these initiatives have truly integrated all the core principles and premises of youth mainstreaming at the whole organisational/system level. The field is still evolving, and it could even be said that the most advanced organisations are competing in their attempts to introduce mainstreaming mechanisms (e.g. EESC 2022). Other organisations and institutions have expressed an interest in exploring this area, even if they have not yet firmly committed to the model. Slowly, youth mainstreaming is becoming a popular term in (European) policy discourses, as the realisation grows that outdated policy structures have left large, damaging gaps in the inclusion and representation of a large, capable and important population.

Growing awareness of existing problems and increasing attempts at youth mainstreaming suggest that we should view the latter as an evolving process rather than as an end state, as with so many other social issues and struggles. With its goal of placing young people on an equal footing with other age groups, youth mainstreaming aims at overall development goals that go beyond poverty reduction and in many ways also address the issues of wealth distribution and of power. It is an endeavour that aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in particular the goal of reducing inequalities (No. 10), which aims to achieve equality of opportunity and reduce inequalities in outcomes, including through the elimination of discriminatory laws, policies and practices and the promotion of appropriate laws, policies and measures. This is why it is so difficult and requires strong political commitments, youth-centred institutions and high levels of youth and stakeholder participation (Commonwealth Secretariat 2008: 34). In addition to these huge commitments, the following smaller steps can be taken to pave the way for a more appropriate integration of youth perspectives.

**Recommendations for organisations involved in youth mainstreaming/integration of youth perspectives**

- Refrain from creating new terms and definitions but stick to the existing ones and use them appropriately and consistently, given the lack of terminological clarity and subsequent confusion among the various stakeholders, especially young people.
- Support the scaling up of successful initiatives (to other policy areas, to other levels of government), including the youth perspectives in policy making and the sharing of knowledge about the benefits of these practices.
- Strive for youth-mainstreamed policy making by focusing on co-designing policies and programmes through robust forms of youth participation and representation and gathering evidence on the impact of representation and participation on the participants themselves.
- Invest in the role of youth coordinators (coordinator, envoy, focal point, etc.) to strengthen youth mainstreaming activities and cross-sectoral co-operation, and to promote awareness raising and dissemination of knowledge about youth and the organisation's efforts and structures in this area. Support these roles with a well-resourced team, Unit of measurement, or office (e.g. a youth department).
- Identify change agents among senior figures in the organisation to raise the priority of youth mainstreaming and promote the organisation's willingness to engage in this process.
- Link youth mainstreaming to the values and professionalism of the organisation and invest in capacity-building activities (e.g. training) to reinforce these values.
- Develop practical and immediately applicable tools to support decision makers in their actions to create conditions for youth mainstreaming and its implementation in (organisational) practice (e.g. guidelines for youth mainstreaming).
- Communicate the importance and benefits of youth mainstreaming to the people you want to win over.
- Organise and/or support networks of youth mainstreaming practitioners and supporters, and strengthen them by sharing good practice, exchanging ideas, facilitating mutual support and training, and building coalitions for individual member campaigns or collective action.
- Building partnerships between young people and institutions as a fundamental building block in overcoming stereotypes and enabling co-operation based on trust, while ensuring that young people are seen as equals and are not patronised.

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## ANNEX: GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWS

1.  What does youth mainstreaming mean to you?

2.  What are the reasons for youth mainstreaming?

3.  What are the mechanisms of youth mainstreaming? What should the mechanisms of youth mainstreaming look like?

4.  What are the prerequisites for youth mainstreaming?

5.  What is/was the example for your institution?

6.  Who is the driving force behind youth mainstreaming? How is it supported and maintained?

7.  What is the aim of youth mainstreaming?

8.  Critical evaluation. Does youth mainstreaming work? Do you think it is bringing about the anticipated change overall?

9.  Is there anything after youth mainstreaming? Anything better? What is the end game?

10. Is there any coordination with other institutions on this topic?

11. Are there any principles of youth mainstreaming you would particularly point to?