



Interview with Chiara Gariazzo

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→ What are the main challenges facing young people in Europe today?

Young people today are facing the consequences of the economic crisis. Youth unemployment has reached historic heights: the youth unemployment rate in January 2013 is 23.6%, affecting more than half of all job-seeking young people in some countries. As many as 14 million young people in the EU aged 15-29 are not in employment, education or training.

Longer periods of inactivity have regrettable secondary effects, such as risks of poverty, exclusion and belated autonomy, independent housing, or the possibility to start a family. This can lead to health, in particular mental health, problems.

In such a context, it is difficult not to consider employment as the main challenge.

→ And what do you think will be the main challenges for young people in 2020?

The European Union is taking a comprehensive set of measures to move

decisively beyond the crisis and, in particular, to support young people confronted with the effects of the crisis. We all hope that the effects of the crisis will be smoothed by 2020.

Once we reach positive growth figures again, we need to build a growth model that is not only smart, based on technology and innovation, but also inclusive and sustainable. Pursuing an economic model that exhausts our natural resources, pollutes our environment, or creates an excluded class without access to the opportunities and benefits of growth is not an option.

These challenges have no quick fix. In 2020 questions to look at might include how to mitigate the effects of climate change, how to achieve environmentally neutral production methods, how to ensure a fair distribution of income or how to ensure inclusion.

The EU's vision for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth is ambitious and requires new ideas and innovative thinking. Young people are well placed, and should be involved in finding future solutions to the challenges ahead. We encourage them to participate in our decision-making processes, in civil society and through making their voices heard.

→ Do you think that the current policy agenda is relevant to these challenges?

I am convinced that this is the case. The EU is handling short-term and longer-term challenges in parallel. In the short run, its Youth Opportunities Initiative, for example, aims at solving the current pressing employment challenges.

The EU Youth Strategy runs until 2018 and promotes a cross-sectoral approach to all policies of relevance to young people, emphasising the need for young people to develop as autonomous citizens, able to live independently and engage in civil society. Employment, education, good health and so on are often interlinked. This is why we advocate the importance of supporting young people not just exclusively in one aspect of their development. Youth work, for example, can help young people in finding solutions to many different challenges.

Together with the Youth in Action programme the EU Youth Strategy emphasises participation, non-formal and informal learning, such as volunteering, and youth work. The future Erasmus for All programme will continue to support this.

The EU Youth Strategy facilitates the involvement of young people in policy making through the structured dialogue, which allows them to formulate joint recommendations with policy makers. These recommendations feed directly into resolutions or conclusions adopted by the youth ministers. The first cycle of structured dialogue was devoted to youth employment, whereas the present cycle focuses on social inclusion of young people.

→ How will the European Union contribute to a better future for young people in 2020?

While the EU pursues its actions to support youth in these times of crisis, as outlined before, let me also mention the EU Youth Strategy's tools. These tools

are about strengthening our knowledge of youth in Europe, our understanding of successful youth policy formulas or understanding what matters to young people by listening to them directly. These tools help us to anticipate and act in a timely manner on youth challenges ahead of us. For example, through peer-learning member states come together to share their experience, extract best practices and tackle joint challenges. We also collect knowledge and research, notably through our partnership with the Council of Europe.

Furthermore, through financial instruments, such as the Youth in Action programme and its successor, or the Structural Funds, the EU is supporting and will continue to support projects for and with young people.

→ How can research contribute to informing the thinking and direction needed to face these challenges?

We must have a knowledge-based approach to youth policy, and youth research is an essential component of this. When policy makers at all levels, from local to European, develop strategies and policies targeting youth, we need to ensure that they are based on the real situation of young people and provide a sound analysis based on knowledge and data. Research can also show that some measures are more effective than others and provide new documentation that challenges us to think in new ways.

There is, for example, increasing recognition that non-formal learning is an essential supplement to school-based education for gaining skills and competences. While people in the European youth sector have long been aware of the values of non-formal learning and youth work, more data and research has helped spark debate outside these circles and increased recognition in this area, for example by formal education. The European Commission has recently commissioned a study on the value of youth work, with expected results by mid-2013.

→ What quality of practice is required and delivered to face the challenges?

The EU policy approaches agreed upon need to be implemented, swiftly and in the best possible way with a view to making a difference in young people's lives. To this end we need dedicated and experienced practitioners who diligently and skilfully bring policy papers to life together with young people. Key words in this context are quality of youth work, training of trainers and mobility of those who work with young people to understand and be able to promote the concept better. A continued effort is necessary to ensure high quality, which will not only convince young people but also policy makers and those who decided on funding.

→ Out of the themes of the first volume of *Perspectives on youth*, which article were you prompted to read first and why?

All the topics are well chosen and I look forward to reading them. Among them, I would pick democracy–citizenship education, the structured participation opportunities and NEETs, and let me explain why. The reasons for this choice are reflected in the current EU youth policy priorities: in times of crisis and perhaps at the risk of appealing to extremist ideas, it is important to remind ourselves that young people should learn about the values of democracy and how to exert their rights as active citizens. An excellent way to involve young people in policy

making is by giving them the opportunity to participate, such as in the structured dialogue. NEETs need our full attention, especially these days, as more and more young people are endangered by poverty and exclusion, and long-term inactivity can feed sentiments of alienation or disengagement. We need to pay attention to their specific needs, which is why the current EU Presidency Trio has chosen social inclusion as priority for 18 months, up to mid-2014.

→ If you had a wish for young people in 2020, what would that be?

The great European visionary, Stéphane Hessel, who recently passed away, said: “I am convinced that future belongs to non-violence, to the reconciliation of different cultures. This is the way that humanity must cross the next step.”

By 2020, I wish that we will be a step closer to the future that Hessel had in mind. A society that offers young people the opportunity to become who they are, to not have to fear their future and to have the freedom and means to meet friends and like-minded spirits in any European country and beyond. I hope they can live in a Europe in which they feel safe and confident, a Europe that inspires them and enables them to fully participate in building its future.