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The think tank on youth policy in Europe

→ Introduction

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At the start of March 2012, a group of some 20 individuals with lengthy experience in research, policy and practice in the youth field, especially at the European level, gathered together for the first time to debate the existing state of play regarding “youth in Europe” and to consider prospective trajectories for the future. The meeting was held in the context of considerable concerns in relation to the two major European institutions taking the European youth agenda forward – the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

The Council of Europe was going through a process of reform, one that was preoccupied with streamlining its activities around its “core business” of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The youth agenda, broadly conceived, was at that time not particularly under threat, though the Youth Directorate within a broad Directorate-General for Education, Culture, Youth and Sports became a Department for Youth, twinned with the Department for Education within a

Directorate of Democratic Citizenship and Participation as part of a Directorate-General for Democracy.

The intention of the European Commission to amalgamate all EU education programmes (for schools, students, adults and “youth”) into one integrated programme, including the Youth in Action programme, branded as Erasmus for All and later named Erasmus+, was perceived by many protagonists of non-formal education and learning in the youth field as an attempt to sideline and diminish the components of the Youth in Action programme in the context of more formal education and learning agendas directed explicitly at the employability and competitiveness priorities of the EU, rather than objectives around the personal and social development of young people and their capacities and capabilities for civic engagement and becoming actors for social change.

The deliberations of the think tank, however, were more wide-ranging: the meeting was an opportunity to take stock of the progress made in the youth field over the preceding 20 (and more) years and to consider whether, especially in the challenging context of economic austerity throughout Europe, some or most of these developments were now under serious threat.

Consequentially, and in view of the continuing economic and political crisis, which has had a disproportionately negative impact on the lives of millions of young people across Europe, the think tank decided to meet a second time, one year almost to the day after the Berlin meeting, though on this occasion in Brussels. The discussions of this second meeting were more forward looking (described by one presenter as moving beyond the concerns of the present to constructing the future). The Brussels meeting focused on the question “Which youth policy do we really want?”, in terms of priorities, objectives, methods, principles and characteristics.

The reflections of the think tank meetings are documented here in two contributions.

In Berlin, it was agreed that people needed to speak forthrightly and discussions were conducted under what in the UK is quaintly known as “Chatham House rules”: issues and ideas can be transmitted but will not be attributed. Howard Williamson undertook to synthesise both the comments projected during the meeting and the “key concerns” provided on paper by those who participated in the first think tank meeting. This constitutes the first contribution.

The second contribution results from the think tank meeting in Brussels. It is a reworked document prepared by Koen Lambert and Hans-Georg Wicke on “Characteristics of a European youth policy and of youth policy in Europe in 2020”. It served as an input for the discussions on a future European youth policy and fits well with the expectation for this first issue of *Perspectives on youth*, which is to envision the future.

This is the basis for looking to the future from a youth policy perspective. It is done with some trepidation, but equally with a strong commitment from those who are still currently at the heart of independent thinking and action on youth policy and practice in Europe.

→ A matter of concern? The future of the youth agenda in Europe

Howard Williamson,

The discussion

Not everybody at the think tank knew each other, experience differed and ages ranged from just over 20 to just over 60. Forty years really is a lifetime in the course of youth policy development at the European level. Following some icebreaking, the opening plenary session endeavoured to address the following questions:

- What are the current challenges for those working on European youth policy?
- How can they sustain a dynamic approach to formulating and implementing youth policy?
- Who is in the driver's seat (or at least competing to drive the car)?
- What are the priorities being established?
- Is youth at the top of the European agenda, or "out of the game"?

There was a strong assertion that European youth policy was essentially a "bottom-up" development, building on experiences, visions and ideas that had originated at local and national levels, then adapted and amended for European application. There was also acknowledgement that there had always been cycles and phases of youth policy shaping and making, and that sometimes the key issue was simply about "bridging the time" until the moment for sharper and concerted action reappeared. Today, however, in a situation of crisis and economic austerity, there was a feeling that the youth agenda was at risk of disappearing or at least being firmly subordinated to what others might well consider to be more pressing political and economic priorities.

It was this perceived and apparent inaction within member states and inertia at the European level that was concentrating the mind. As the politics of austerity and the polarisation of life chances for the young in different parts of Europe was playing out, the usefully provocative and ambiguous question was raised: "What is Left for young people, what is Right for young people?".

The think tank itself confirmed some level of common agreement on the idea of "youth policy" – its transversality, inclusiveness, positive and opportunity-focused orientation, and relationship to robust research evidence. It commended the Council of Europe for having retained the "co-management" principle and practice in the youth field, whereby decisions and direction were shared between governmental officials and the representatives of youth organisations. What was needed, however, was for the European institutions to bring together relevant parties for a more informed debate that would contribute to the restoration of "commitment, focus, resources and provision" in the youth field.

These, it was felt, had dissipated in recent years, within many member states. Internal economic and political conditions had witnessed the withdrawal of support for youth initiatives and provision. Some participants maintained that the EU potentially had a key role as a catalyst in activating and energising momentum at national levels; others questioned whether the EU had, or should have, such authority. What was not in doubt in participants' minds was what they depicted as the increasing "hollowness" of European youth agendas. And even when national policies and programmes were being cut dramatically, the European institutions had a role, indeed a responsibility, to stimulate transnational youth work projects.

At the very moment when those in the youth field felt “youth work” was more prominent on the map of young people’s learning, development, engagement and inclusion, and was finally getting the institutional recognition it had long sought (see Resolution of the Council of the European Union on youth work 2010 and the report of Belgium’s Presidency of the EU 2010), wider factors seemed to have conspired to squeeze the lifeblood from it. Its place, position and power within the broader youth agenda was seemingly immediately diluted, despite both contentions and some evidence of the contribution to be made across the youth policy field by youth work and non-formal education – and reinforced by the end of the year by a study commissioned by the European Youth Forum demonstrating the “employability” soft skills that accrue from non-formal learning experiences (see European Youth Forum 2012). Yet suddenly the firewalls between education and youth work, formal and non-formal learning, had re-appeared, despite prevailing evidence suggesting that there are in fact few clear divisions and that building bridges and cultivating new learning contexts and methodologies, thereby producing broader educational approaches, are critical both for individual young people and for the societies in which they live. The think tank acknowledged that the proposed Erasmus for All programme (2014-2020), incorporating all previous EU educational measures (for students, schools, older people as well as young people) was a key component of future youth policy. Depending on the future EU budget (negotiations started at the end of 2012), it might well be argued that the programme could no longer afford to support “youth” elements to the extent of the previous Youth in Action programme – but a counterpoint would be that it cannot not afford to do so either. In the context of its perceived weakened political position, and therefore reduced capacity for negotiation and advocacy in the places that mattered, the question was how to communicate the added value of what youth work (non-formal education) did. There was a despondency that the sustaining of youth work within the broader frame of youth policy would be achieved only through connecting – “re-packaging” – it more firmly alongside crime reduction, vocational preparation or labour-market training programmes.

Not that participants were completely hostile to such scenarios; there was always need for adjustment to changing times and contexts. Yet equally there was a determination to defend the cherished values around non-formal learning and to resist their co-option into a single-track preoccupation with economic problems, labour-market insertion and employability.

The meeting concluded with a renewed commitment to exploring, through a “new creativity” between policy makers, researchers and practitioners in the youth field, how the further evolution of “clustered” and “overlapping” youth policy might be secured – beyond the knowledge and skills agenda (though this was accepted as a central task) to questions of participation and voice, intergenerational transfers of experience and resources, intercultural tolerance and understanding, and integration and social cohesion. Structures needed to be adapted or constructed to strengthen sustainability, confidence, trust and decision making at the European level. The balance of power in the youth field in Europe needed to be re-aligned between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, and the European Union needed to connect more forcefully with the youth policy and practice within its member states and, indeed, those beyond – in candidate countries, the Balkans and the Eastern Partnership.

The “concerns”

A central purpose of the think tank was to find ways of moving from expending “defensive energy” towards a position of “creative engagement”, though finding the niche to do so was also a matter for concern. Indeed, the youngest participant was convinced and concerned about the prevailing “loss of hope and enthusiasm” – amongst young people, researchers, stakeholders in the youth field and politicians. Drawing on lines from Pink Floyd’s *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*, the desire was not to “bask in the glory of yesterday’s triumph” but, once more, to “shine like the sun”. Currently, it seemed to many of these individuals with incomparable experience and expertise in the youth field, there were too many “black holes in the sky”.

Two decades, or more, of achievement

Basking in yesterday’s triumph was, however, often a starting point. Many expressed concerns were set in the context of some recognition that there has been significant achievement in the development and evolution of youth policy over the past quarter of a century, or at least the past 10-15 years. This was described, in a consistently similar way, as “considerable progress”, a “formative period”, and a “time of tremendous evolution” in and for the youth field.

The past decade had been “very dynamic”, in which “common ground” and “close co-operation” had been established between member states and the European institutions, producing almost the European youth coalition that had at one point been envisioned by the then Director for Education and Citizenship within the European Commission. That was a framework of co-operation constructed across parties at similar levels of strategy, operation and implementation, and between these levels, through dialogue and participation between youth field actors (see Milmeister and Williamson 2006). Such key planks for exchange and innovation had been strengthened through knowledge production, professionalism, reflection and recognition of the contribution made by the youth field both to the lives and prospects of young people and to the broader youth policy agenda.

Shifts and fragmentation

Today, however, and over the past couple of years, it was suggested and asserted that there had been a breakdown and break-up of the youth field. A situation of “stagnation” had set in: there appeared to be little development or tracking of goals and objectives that had earlier been set through various declarations and policy decisions. The position of youth policy had been weakened, trapped in inertia, as the economic crisis had turned the attention of key stakeholders (within both the European institutions and the member states) to apparently more pressing matters. The “European dynamic” in the youth field had “ground to a halt”, as different players engaged in “regression and retrenchment after two decades of development”. There was now little more than lip service to “evidence-based” approaches to youth policy making; divide and rule strategies now seemed to be adopted in the fields of both practice and research. In short, there had been a disintegration, dilution if not yet complete disappearance of the “vision and drive” that had characterised the youth field for a generation.

The lack of investment and visibility

When setting the scene, some contributors gave disproportionate attention, weight and implied influence and impact to, for example, a succession of networks of

researchers convened by the Council of Europe and latterly the youth partnership, notable publications produced from time to time by academics known to the youth field, the international reviews of national youth policy conducted by the Council of Europe since 1997, and the Partnership's European Knowledge Centre on Youth Policy (EKCYF) that was established in 2005. All have, without doubt, played their part in contributing to the dynamic and momentum of youth policy since the turn of the millennium, but all have equally had their weaknesses and deficiencies that few have been willing to point out. Indeed, the youth (work) field had, according to some, become increasingly "hidden", subordinated and subservient to more dominant agendas. The youth agenda had been "dragged" towards education policy, often subsumed at national level within ministries of education, and aligned increasingly forcefully to questions of skills and qualifications and economic and "employability" agendas. As one individual commented, "youth is hard to find – for future action". There was a lack of investment in youth policy, and a lack of recognition of, and respect for, the concept, role and purpose of non-formal education.

Though not subscribing to a conspiracy theory, there were perplexed expressions at the apparent lack of any sense of urgency about defining a future budgetary framework for "youth" and about the poor levels of commitment. No wonder the sense of invisibility for youth. There appeared to be no concern for the autonomy of the youth field, nor advocacy of the added value of the youth sector. Furthermore, some respondents wondered if those in the formal education sector really knew what had been achieved in the youth sector, what it did, and the particular challenges it faced. Probably not, many concluded. The shift from opportunity-focused youth policy to approaches targeting specific problems and issues was a concern to all.

Threats to democracy and debate

In view of the events during the economic crisis – the demonstrations, protests and resistance, most involving if not led by young people – the case for strengthening youth participation and engaging them in democratic renewal, through the established practices of non-formal education, would appear to be unequivocal. This agenda was, indeed, first "institutionalised" (albeit in a reasonably non-institutional way!) by the Council of Europe following *les évènements* of 1968. The year 2012 in fact celebrated the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, the hub of generations of educational and cultural programmes and activities designed, through experiential learning, to equip young people with the capacity and competence to play their part in Europe. One might ask why this has been so hard to sustain: the numerous political actors at local, national and European levels who once passed through such experiences on the way to their current positions of influence and authority appear to have forgotten what exactly helped them along and oiled the wheels of their human, social and identity capital.

Structures for collaboration and consultation

The EU White Paper on Youth of 2001, notwithstanding what is said above, was heralded as a key staging post on the evolutionary road of youth policy that produced a robust framework for engagement between the European Commission and its member states – the "open method of co-ordination". New arrangements for collaboration, through the "trio" presidencies over periods of 18 months, and through the so-called "structured dialogue" (first on youth employment, then

on democratic participation, now on social inclusion) were viewed as cumbersome, rather unworkable frameworks, that did not produce the same “progress” as the OMC. They did not establish the same structures or agreed content as the former mechanisms that framed the relationships within the youth field between the European Commission and the member states. Indeed, there was often now a disjuncture between the topics chosen for attention by each trio presidency (despite being within the same overall theme), between these topics and themes and issues most relevant to different member states, and between the European Commission’s main projects and the aims of its youth strategy.

The restoration of effective dialogue and the renewal of purposeful platforms for debate, perhaps through the reinstatement of a process by which common objectives were agreed and then pursued by member states, was therefore unsurprisingly viewed as critical.

Reflective self-criticism

The think tank was by no means all about hurling criticism at extraneous bureaucracies and their grinding procedures; there was also a fair share of self-reflection and self-criticism. For example, one commentator asserted very directly that “the youth field has an attitude problem” (a “bad attitude when it comes to change”), while others pointed to the absence of synchronicity between the arguments of youth organisations and the positions adopted by youth researchers, especially in the field of debate around social inclusion. Indeed, the oft-proclaimed “magic triangle” between youth research, policy and practice that promoted purposeful and positive dialogues and networking was portrayed as “far from magical” and frequently tokenistic and even mythical. Even the current aspirations of the youth field were called into question. For example, even should greater autonomy for the youth field be negotiated successfully within the future education and learning programme of the EU, this would “still not take us beyond the status quo”. The youth field had, in some minds, “stagnated”, retreating into comfort zones that in effect colluded with risk-averse officials for whom the mantra was the less work to take home, the better. Arguably, some youth policy was now seriously outdated, at least in some areas: the challenges around formal education, not to speak of employment and housing, had overtaken it.

More was needed. The language used by participants was about “reformulation”, “re-shaping”, “innovation” and “revitalisation”, with the intention of cementing a new “vision”. Not everything, however, was broken and needed to be fixed. Indeed, though new youth policy agendas were called for that anticipated the prospects of and for youth in the first half of this century – to address the democratic challenge, to strengthen inter-professional collaboration, and to accommodate new learning needs – there was no need to discover new tools for their realisation. Being “avant-garde”, through more creative and inspired thinking amongst relevant stakeholders beyond “safe ground”, did not necessitate the abandonment of proven strategies and methods, though perhaps practices and procedures needed to be strengthened, and certainly there was a case for reflection, revision and possibly renaming.

Moving forward to 2020

Both structural and economic reforms, flowing from different quarters and with different rationales, were perceived to have weakened the youth field. Various efforts to produce a new political dynamic in the youth field had, so far, come

to nothing. Three central trajectories, constructed around perceptions of what is lacking and what is needed in the youth field, were identified:

- Lack of a political vision relating to themes, priorities, aims and objectives – taking account of the complexity in which youth policy is situated.
What is needed is a mid- to long-term strategy that provides innovation, continuity and coherence, avoiding “theme-hopping” from one presidency to the next and ticking the “done” box.
- Lack of leadership and a co-ordinated but flexible and open approach to interaction, co-operation and communication, in which all parties involved can take appropriate responsibilities, find their place and commit themselves to playing an active role.
What is needed is a real network structure, not the ritualised and rigid hierarchical relationships that are per se exclusive.
- Lack of concrete dialogue, between all key and relevant stakeholders, at different levels of decision making.
What is needed is a broadening of the coalition of involved partners coming from diverse professional backgrounds, political sectors and levels of governance (European, national, regional, local). There needs to be various levels of formalised dialogical co-operation – between institutions and support structures. There also needs to be informal platforms and forums, beyond ritualised forms of meetings and mechanisms, in order to convene high quality exchange and debate in pursuit of ideas, information, knowledge and understanding on youth and the development of sustainable, reliable and efficient strategies.

The think tank concluded that the kind of communication and co-ordination framework envisaged would only prove to be effective in the context of the restoration of trust between many youth field actors.

Beyond Hebe’s dream

When the EU White Paper was launched in Gent in 2001, the conference bag carried the logo: “Hebe’s Dream: a future for young people in Europe”. Four planks of youth policy development were promoted that day: information, participation, voluntary activities and a greater knowledge of youth. Many would contend that the youth agenda now has a longer, stronger and deeper priority list, demanding urgent and immediate attention. Like the Europe 2050 vision (see European Commission 2011) that presents three prospective scenarios for the European Union (nobody cares – stagnation; under threat – fragmented; and renaissance – expansion), it would be possible to provide a range of scenarios for the future of youth in Europe. One would be depressing, in which “youth” would be generally abandoned in the interests of meeting the political and social demands of older generations, and supported only when they displayed the potential for making a much needed economic contribution. Quite what would happen to other young people – abandoned by welfare frameworks and consigned to the margins – is in itself a matter for a range of speculative scenarios; revolt, resistance, radicalisation or retreat (see Williamson 2013, forthcoming). A more centred scenario might see some level of accommodation and inclusion of more young people, but only to a minimalist degree that contained any threat of urban disturbance and disorder, while more active and participative young people benefited from the “social capital” opportunities and possibilities afforded to them through their civic engagement and internships. A third, more inclusive scenario, would see the harnessing of political and economic energy in the interests of the young, to ensure that all young people received an equitable package of entitlement to provide them with the best chance of achieving their potential. That would include, of course, formal education and training, but it

would also encapsulate a wider range of opportunities and experiences, including non-formal education, exchanges, access to new technologies, attachment to music and culture, platforms for participation and “voice”, and pathways for volunteering and community involvement. This is “youth work” in its broadest and most meaningful sense.

To that end, dreaming towards 2020, there is a pressing need for greater convergence in the youth field. Despite allegations of recent fragmentation, the youth field has always been divided by its pathways to and through the two European institutions most relevant to it – the European Commission and the Council of Europe. Various protocols and partnerships, including the latest youth partnership, have sought to build bridges between the two. But, with the crisis in Europe affecting young people disproportionately and in so many ways (learning, earning, housing, leisure, health and so forth), there is a growing *prima facie* case for creating one coherent infrastructure for political co-operation and policy development in the youth field as well as a single support structure for youth work. Such a vision would include, *inter alia*:

- a long-term joint political strategy, whereby European-level objectives identify the support measures for the development of programmes at national level to further consolidate youth policies within commonly defined standards;
- a comprehensive review process and peer-learning system for national youth policies (building on the experience of the Council of Europe youth policy reviews);
- one single, coherent programme to support exchange and pilot projects, youth work structures and youth NGOs;
- a support structure for research and development in youth policy, at both national and European levels;
- a European Youth Agency responsible for gathering knowledge, giving information, training European youth workers, promoting the exchange of good practice and promoting the participation of young people.

Conclusion

The think tank that met in Berlin in March 2012, and one year later again in Brussels 2013 (see below), was not a representative body, though it did include participants from all sectors of the youth field: European institutions, member states, municipalities, national agencies, youth organisations, youth researchers, and so on. It had no mandate, except to discuss the direction of the youth agenda at the European level. It resulted from one concern – that this youth agenda had lost its way. It gave birth to a range of related concerns as a result of concerted and committed discussion, the very thing that the European youth agenda cries out for on a broader canvas. The arguments and perspectives reported here are intended both to provide some historical context to the current situation and to provoke interest and response in order to move that youth agenda forward.

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→ European youth policy and youth policy in Europe in 2020

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Despite the concerns expressed during the initial discussions of the think tank, ambitions to create new dynamics in the youth policy field were shared by a lot of, if not all, participants. Discussions often started from the idea that a lot has been achieved in the past 20 years and that there is widespread common agreement on the essentials of "youth policy". But there is also a need for a long-term vision, describing where ideally we would like to arrive in some years time and giving some kind of orientation for the next steps to take.

The contribution below is an attempt to formulate, in short, such a vision for 2020. It tries to take into account what we understand as that current common agreement, that common "image" of youth policy as it has been expressed in a lot of official political decisions and contributions, but also in countless informal discussions and debates. But in the end, it is written from our personal perspective of being involved in this debate for a long time as heads of a National Agency of the Youth in Action programme (and its predecessors): a unique place as an actor in the field of youth policy, and at the same time at the European and national level. It is based on ideas and beliefs that have grown from that practice, on observations during the past 20 years, on what we have learnt from other actors in working groups, network meetings, EU presidency events, and many others.

We believe that such "formulation in short" can be of help in a twofold way. It sets steady and long-term goals that can be kept in mind by all those who are concerned about the future of youth policy and fear that its core ideas can get lost in current policy making, inspired by an undoubtedly still-expanding crisis. And on the other hand, right at this moment, it confronts us with the question: how will we get there? What are the stepping stones in between? What do we do first? Do we have clear strategies in mind, shared among all the main actors?

And how do we link that with the urgent needs resulting from that crisis? This is the debate that we want to provoke, that we want to take on board, in the think tank, but also with many others in the youth field.

We have tried to determine the main characteristics of the common “image” in youth policy in Europe, as we believe it exists through the eyes of many stakeholders. The exercise resulted in an inventory of 12 features of European youth policy and youth policy in Europe that exist already or are considered desirable. We consider all of them essential and typical for youth policy in 2020 and, since they are easy to recognise, they can act as cardinal points for our action.

Autonomy and well-being of young people at the centre

Youth policy is a comprehensive concept with a holistic approach. It puts young people as a whole at the centre, aiming for their autonomy and well-being. It focuses on their present life but also their future, moving from childhood to adulthood. Youth policy develops, on the one hand, policy strategies to create and provide space and opportunities for young people, in order to build up capabilities to gain autonomy and to meet or exceed a threshold of well-being. On the other hand, youth policy develops specific policies towards the personal and social development of those young people who are in trouble. It is protective where needed, as well as being empowering and providing second chances.

Transnational policy strategy for young people and their living conditions in Europe

Young people are entitled to have a comprehensive policy focusing on their autonomy and well-being at all levels. Living conditions of young people are affected by circumstances and development that are far beyond national borders. At the same time, the Europeanised and globalised world offers a lot of new opportunities and risks for young people. In this respect, national policies have their natural limitations. On the one hand, European youth policy, as cooperation between countries, is an answer to the demand for transnational policy strategies for young people and their living conditions in an integrated Europe. On the other hand, European youth policy aims to help develop national youth policies of a comparable quality all over Europe.

A categorical policy, focused on all who are young: from children to young adults

Developments beyond national borders affect all who are young, from children to teenagers, young people to young adults. The well-being and growth to autonomy of all of them is involved. Youth policy focuses on a category of young citizens, defined by age, but also by their status as minors or being in transition to full autonomy. It develops its legal framework and its actions taking into account the continuum of growth from child to adult.

Nothing about us, without us

The objectives of youth policy (well-being and growth to autonomy) cannot be achieved without young people themselves. It calls for their action, their responsibility to grow. It invites them to get involved. Therefore, youth policy is participative and transparent in its processes and its leadership. The variety of actors at different levels also calls for a constant dialogue and interaction between policy and practice. Youth policy establishes and uses well-designed

open processes of participation and the necessary structures to guarantee the existence, quality and legitimacy of participation. Youth policy always responds to the outcome of participation.

Interactive field with multi-polar steering and democratic leadership

European youth policy is a hybrid, derived from heterogeneous sources. It enlarges the triangle of policy, research and practice into an interactive field with different actors from different countries, sectors, roles, disciplines and professions, involved at different intensities. It includes civil society as well as young people themselves. It is driven by an interdisciplinary and multi-professional coalition of those responsible and concerned. It has a network structure with different hubs and clusters. It allows for multi-polar steering and is based on democratic leadership.

Co-operation within the EU and Council of Europe and open to the world

European youth policy is based on co-operation in the youth field within the EU and Council of Europe, each within the frame of its own legal competence: inter-governmental for Council of Europe, and supranational (but within boundaries of subsidiarity) for the EU. It aims for stronger links and co-operation between both international institutions. It is equally aiming for political decisions at European and member-state level with regard to legal frameworks and for concrete actions to support the quality of practice at all levels. It includes all three sectors: the “state” and its public agents (organisations and bodies of the EU and Council of Europe, member states, parliament(s), etc.); the “market” and private corporations and foundations; and “civil society” and non-profit organisations. European youth policy touches on all different levels, from local to regional, to national and European. It is open to the world and has a global dimension.

A solid trunk to build on: youth work

Youth policy is a comprehensive concept with a holistic approach. It has its specific themes and practices. In order to realise its goals, it also builds on the practice and experience in the field where this holistic approach is realised by a variety of different types of actors: public service, NGOs at all levels, youth organisations and initiatives, expert organisations, and regional and local authorities (the youth sector). Important roles are taken by professionals (paid and voluntary) working with young people. And a specific role is taken by youth organisations, which provide opportunities for young people by young people. Youth policy cherishes the youth work by these actors, creates adapted legal frameworks, supports the quality of their work while respecting their competence and, when relevant, their autonomous status.

Cross-sectoral policy for a manifold life

Youth policy is a comprehensive concept with a holistic approach. Therefore it is a cross-sectoral policy: it deals with all aspects of young people's lives and involves all governmental departments and sectors administering these various aspects. It needs co-ordination at the political and administrative level. It builds on the experience of the youth sector, taking the lead in formulating policies. And it has its clearly defined mid- or long-term youth policy process(es) and planning on (a) priority theme(s).

Linking knowledge with policies and practices

European youth policy is knowledge based. Deriving from the knowledge and experiences of heterogeneous sources in this interactive field, European youth

policy is anticipating and analysing new trends and developments, offering deep insights and knowledge about policies and practices, looking at the coherence between policy aims and actions and proposing pathways and measures. New forms of European youth reports and systems of monitoring allow the building of a reliable link to political decision making at European level and a practical link to the implementation of actions.

Platforms for debate and development

European youth policy has its specific and regular places and spaces for dialogue, participation, co-operation and transparency, such as yearly conventions, thematic clusters, sectoral groups, long-term processes and virtual platforms. A yearly “European Convention on Youth Policy and Youth Work” is its regular physical platform. It is working in the long term, in different peer-learning clusters on priority themes for exchange, co-operation and agenda setting. It also brings actors inside the different youth policy sectors together to allow for further development of practices. It has its overarching virtual platform for continuous exchange among all the actors involved.

Agents, driving engines and “transfer agencies”

Besides the policy framework and processes, the interactive field of European youth policy has several different hubs, working as driving engines of process and content, as “transfer agencies” between the different levels and sectors and as agents for ideas and concepts. Therefore, European youth policy is supported by different structures at the European level, for example, by a specialised European Centre for supporting Youth Policy and Youth Work, and by the European NGO sector (European Youth Forum, and so on), but also by the structures of the EU youth programme (national agencies, SALTO Resource Centres, the Youth partnership between the Council of Europe and the EU, and so on). At the same time, European youth policy has corresponding support structures at the national level.

A specific and independent financial instrument and legal basis

The current Youth in Action programme is the main funding instrument at the European level to support the further development and implementation of European youth policy and of youth policy in Europe. With the new programme for education and training, youth and sports, it is embedded in a broader political environment. Links between the education, training and youth work sector are a reality, as is the contribution of youth work to a European strategy for lifelong learning and to the Europe 2020 strategy. Nevertheless, European youth policy and youth policy in Europe needs its own financial instrument and legal basis, specifically dedicated to the aims and needs of the youth sector, reaching out for a sustainable systemic impact on youth policy and youth work at the European and national level.