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Covid-19 recovery policy measures: the role of governments, youth organisations and young people in Europe

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1. Introduction

The EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership’s Knowledge Hub, which was launched in October 2020, comprises data and information sources on research related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people and the youth sector.

The data and information gathered over the past three years derive from two main sources:

- surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 among European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy EKCYP correspondents and the Pool of European Youth Researchers PEYR, providing timely updates on the impact of the pandemic across Europe;
- thematic research and meta-analysis of research on the impact of the pandemic on young people that resulted in a number of analytical papers, policy briefs and reports.

The Knowledge Hub also includes a database of research conducted during the pandemic on its impact on young people, covering nine topics: social inclusion; youth participation; youth work; education, training and learning mobility; health, mental health and well-being; employment and professional development; digitalisation and AI; youth organisations; national realities in Europe.

The surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 focused on the impact of the pandemic in the following areas.

- Communication with young people during lockdowns.
- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on:
 - policy and funding;
 - state-operated programmes, youth work services and other support for young people;
 - NGO-sector programmes, youth work services and other support for young people;
 - the mental health and well-being of young people.
- The role played by digitalisation in responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic.
- Emerging youth issues identified for prioritisation under European recovery programmes.
- The challenges and opportunities of post-pandemic youth policy.

The thematic research addressed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on:

- the mental health and psychological well-being of young people
- young people in rural areas not in education, employment or training (NEETs)
- youth services and access to services
- access to learning mobility
- youth inclusion, digital solutions and the global pandemic
- youth homelessness in “generation Covid-19”
- youth participation and youth spaces
- young people and the youth sector in two regions: South-East Europe and Eastern Europe and South Caucasus.

Meta-analysis of research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic provided wide-ranging and timely overviews of research guiding policy work at European and national levels.

In 2022, the focus of work for the Knowledge Hub shifted towards addressing the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the geopolitical consequences of the war in Ukraine, as well as drawing upon, learning from and focusing on the policy responses to the way the youth policy landscape has been shaped in Europe.

Accordingly, the first policy brief in 2022 focused on reflecting on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector and the relevance of the EU recovery and resilience plans, as follows.

- The long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the youth sector, and in particular its impact on:
 - the mental health and well-being of young people;
 - youth employment and the financial security of young people;
 - youth participation and social inclusion;
 - youth work and youth organisations.
- Next Generation EU Recovery and Resilience Plans: their relevance for young people.

This policy brief sought to complement and expand on the work done over the past three years with a particular focus on the following.

- Delivering for youth: young people at the centre of the government recovery policies. This includes an overview of government approaches, measures and youth engagement, with a focus on OECD countries.¹
- Next Generation EU recovery and resilience plans: impact and policy landscape – a review of the implementation of recovery and resilience plans in their first year of operation and how they affected the lives of young people and the emerging policy landscape in Europe in the wake of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine.
- The role of youth organisations – a review of emerging “post-pandemic” policy issues and initiatives, and innovative practices in voluntary youth NGOs.
- The conclusions not only address the work carried out in 2022 but also look back at the work of the last three years and set out the key findings and responses, and the current and emerging policy issues, options and priorities.

2. Delivering for youth: young people at the centre of the government recovery policies

Consulting young people and engaging them in the design of response and recovery measures can have positive effects on their personal development, build social cohesion and ensure that policies are well informed and responsive (OECD 2017). Yet, findings from the assessment of national response and recovery plans and budgets show that less than a

1. Most (21) OECD countries within the European Union developed their plans as part of the European-wide stimulus package, Next Generation EU, to co-ordinate a joint recovery vision in the region (EC (2021), Recovery Plan for Europe, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en#introduction).

third of all OECD countries (10) explicitly mention having consulted young people or youth organisations when devising them (OECD 2020).

Nevertheless, 29 of 32 OECD countries with a comparable national response and recovery plan in place include specific policies, programmes or other commitments for young people in their plans, with 10 of them also detailing how young people have been consulted in the process. Of the 32 OECD countries with a comparable national response and recovery plan in place, 24 have introduced measures to support young people in vulnerable circumstances (OECD 2022).

To ensure considerations about the well-being of young people and future generations are integrated into all areas of policy making, OECD evidence points to innovative efforts undertaken by some countries to create independent institutions and use new public governance tools, acknowledging that investments made now will have profound future implications (OECD 2020a).

In 2020, numerous countries launched digital engagement opportunities, including online consultations, to involve young people in the design of response measures to the crisis (OECD 2020a). A majority of OECD countries (25) already have national youth councils, which help governments to gather information, ensure wide consultation and run joint activities and programmes. In addition, 17 OECD countries have national youth advisory councils affiliated to the government or specific ministries, such as in Denmark, where the Ministry of Environment and Food has established a Youth Climate Council (OECD 2020a). However, available information on the response and recovery plans suggests that only Estonia has engaged its National Youth Council as a key partner in the planning and implementation of response and recovery measures (Government of Estonia 2021, in OECD 2022).

OECD-based youth organisations express concerns about the lack of opportunities for young people to shape response and recovery measures. Only 15% feel their government considered young people's views when adopting lockdown and confinement measures. More than half believe financial support schemes (56%) and infrastructure investment responses (54%) have not incorporated young people's views (OECD 2022).

3. Next Generation EU recovery and resilience plans: relevance for young people

While 2021 saw a broad-based, if uneven, economic and social recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, 2022 brought new challenges – supply chain issues, energy cost increases and inflation – in large part due to the war in Ukraine. The impact of the pandemic was mitigated to some extent by government interventions and the EU's stimulus package (€2.018 trillion) including its Next Generation EU (€806.9 billion) initiative aimed at rebuilding the European economy and strengthening social cohesion as well as providing for the transition to a greener and more digitalised Europe.

3.1. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF): implementation and impact

Since the established the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), measures have been undertaken to implement and give effect to the regulation. As of summer 2022, some

€100 billion in RRF funds have already been disbursed under member states' Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs). The RRFs of all member states – with the exception of the Netherlands and Hungary – had been endorsed by the European Commission and the European Council by the summer of 2022.

The RRF provides that the member states will report twice yearly on progress in implementing RRFs and that such reporting will be reflected in national reform programmes. The European Commission will provide an annual report to the European Parliament and the European Council on the implementation of the RRF (EUR-Lex 2021).

The RRF provides that the reforms and investments included in each of the RRFs must reach targets for climate and digital expenditure and contribute appropriately to the six pillars or policy areas of European relevance, as follows:

1. green transition;
2. digital transformation;
3. smart, sustainable and inclusive growth;
4. social and territorial cohesion;
5. health, and economic, social and institutional resilience, with the aim of, *inter alia*, increasing crisis preparedness and crisis response capacity;
6. policies for the next generation, children and young people, such as education and skills.

While each RRF must include a minimum of 37% of allocated funds for climate action, a number of member states have used more than half of their allocation towards climate action objectives. Similarly, the RRF requires the member states to target more than 20% of their allocated funds to digital transformation; most member states have exceeded this target.

However, the bulk of expenditure under the RRF to date, some 82%, has been on the green transition, social and territorial cohesion, and digital transformation, with only 16% being allocated to health, economic, social and institutional resilience in responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, and 12% being allocated to next generation measures, including education and skills.

The European Commission's most recent report (European Commission 2022a) indicates that more than a quarter of the total expenditure in the adopted RRFs is estimated to contribute to social expenditure, including children and young people. Under the methodology provided for under the RRF regulation, the European Commission classifies all social expenditure, including children and young people, into nine broad policy areas, which are aggregated into four social categories:

- employment and skills
- education and childcare
- health and long-term care
- social policies.

Under the RRF, some €135 billion is earmarked for such social spending, which represents about 30% of the total estimated expenditure. Around one third of this amount is dedicated to spending on education and childcare, another one third on health and long-term care, while the rest is divided between spending on employment and skills, and social policies. Measures under the policies for the next generation, children and youth focus primarily on education, training, early childhood education and care, and measures to support youth employment. Around three quarters of the total expenditure related to pillar six, amounting to some €56 billion, contribute to general, vocational and higher education.

Out of the milestones and targets related to pillar six, 18 have been fulfilled. These milestones and targets are associated with measures on active labour market policies, supporting the digital transformation in education, support for teaching, hiring subsidies for apprenticeships and support for higher education.

The RRF also provides that funding to “reinforce” RRFs is also available to member states to support additional reforms and investment.

The implementation of the RRF to date is broadly reflective of its intent and purpose. The high level of policy focus and funding on the green transition and digital transformation do reflect, if not necessarily constitute a response to, young people’s prioritisation of climate change issues and enhancing digital skills and capacity, even though these issues preceded the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. While social expenditure is also prioritised, the main focus appears to be on more formal and large-scale structures in education, employment and healthcare.

In education and training, the focus appears to be on improving the functioning of schools and universities, modernising programmes and improving school attendance, access and learning, as well as enhancing the physical infrastructure and equipment. Similarly, in the field of employment the focus is on job creation through grants to private-sector companies and public bodies and providing more career and higher education opportunities for young people.

While more funding is also potentially available to support additional reforms and investment, the extent to which this might include additional support for young people is questionable. The European Commission’s proposal to amend the RRF to include REPowerEU to support planning and financing of cross-border and national infrastructure, as well as energy projects and reforms, may be an indication that additional funding under and reforms to the RRF may reflect major emerging policy issues, such as energy security and supply, rather than the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (EIPA 2022).

With respect to the needs and concerns articulated by young people, emerging from the pandemic and facing the consequences of war in Ukraine, it might be argued that the RRF will address some of these; in particular, climate change issues, digitalisation, strengthening education and employment opportunities, and social cohesion and resilience. However, it might also be argued that some of the more nuanced concerns articulated by young people – the need to be informed, consulted and involved; mental health challenges; greater civic engagement; financial security; media literacy; and support for non-formal education and

learning – appear to have fallen between the cracks of larger, more formal and better financed support structures.

While the RRF requires twice yearly reports from the member states and an annual report to the European Parliament and the European Council on progress in the implementation of RRFs, disaggregating data in respect of inputs and outcomes for young people may not be transparent – in classifying and aggregating social expenditure, children and young people appear to be included together for reporting purposes.

The Bruegel Research Institute also point to factors that “create a risk that good value will not be obtained“ from the RRF, and the possibility that no member state will be able to justify costs to a “high extent” and the possible implications of a “medium-quality” cost justification (Bruegel 2022).

3.2. The emerging youth policy landscape in Europe

The emerging youth policy landscape in Europe, while reflective of issues highlighted by young people in the wake of the pandemic, does not necessarily provide a coherent framework for addressing these issues and these variations are evident in different studies and reports.

The European Commission’s “Annual review of employment and social developments in Europe – Young Europeans: employment and social challenges ahead” (European Commission 2022b) – acknowledges the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on young people:

- the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing challenges faced by young people;
- the labour market environment during the pandemic was more challenging for young people than for older age groups;
- the pandemic affected young women and young men differently;
- many young people have experienced difficulties in finding affordable housing and meeting everyday expenses;
- young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were worse affected;
- there were substantial differences in the impact on young people across member states;
- young people’s life satisfaction and mental health worsened during the pandemic;
- trust in national governments and EU institutions fell, but were higher among young people than older people;
- young people do not feel sufficiently well represented.

Young people of working age faced deteriorating living conditions in a number of EU countries, with a higher risk of poverty and material and social deprivation.

When it comes to the everyday lives and living conditions of young people during the pandemic, while the review argues that during the pandemic, state benefits had a stronger impact on young people than on the overall population, it also points to:

- the risk of poverty being higher for young people who move out of the parental household;
- young workers facing larger labour income volatility;
- disparities in resilience between younger and older people being much more pronounced in eastern and southern Europe;
- young people’s tendency to rely on friends and relatives during times of distress, largely due to low social protection;
- house price increases that have worsened housing affordability for young people;
- lower home-ownership rates for young people, which contribute to their lower accumulated wealth;
- gender pay inequalities.

However, the policy responses to these challenges outlined in the review focus largely, if not entirely, on the RRF. The review identifies youth-related actions in 20 of the 22 RRFs submitted by May 2022. It refers to “strong heterogeneity in the share of youth-related measures over the total estimated cost of the RRFs and in the typologies of measures selected by Member States in their plans”. They point to southern and eastern member states reporting the highest proportion of youth-related measures associated with investments in education infrastructure and equipment.

While there appears to be an increasing policy focus on such issues as early education and care and tackling gender inequalities, the review appears sceptical of the effectiveness of distance learning, online learning being seen as less effective than face-to-face teaching, and finds “less conclusive evidence or no evidence at all” of learning loss during the pandemic.

A report to the European Parliament’s Committee (CULT) on Culture and Education (European Parliament 2021) focuses on early childhood education and care, school education, vocational education and training and higher education. It also includes youth policy and youth work in its analysis, as well as EU programme measures such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps.

The CULT report takes a more detailed and expansive consideration of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of young people, addressing such issues as youth participation, prioritisation of the needs of young people in Covid-19 mitigation measures and the impact of the pandemic on the well-being and mental health of young people, on youth workers and NGOs and on youth work practice. It also makes frequent reference to studies and surveys conducted under the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership Covid-19 Knowledge Hub.

The report identifies “key persisting challenges” in the youth work sector laid bare by the impact of the pandemic, including the need to:

- define and recognise the role of youth work across Europe;
- invest in the professional development of youth workers, including their digital literacy;
- enhance the credibility of youth work leading to stronger social and political recognition and more reliable and sustainable resourcing for youth work at all levels;

- develop a stronger framework of youth work policy and practice explicitly linking it with other sectors.

In aiming to further strengthen the capacity and resources of the youth sector, the report also highlights the importance of:

- the EU's Digital Education Action Plan, which needs to be reinforced to cover non-formal education and learning and to build the competences of both youth workers and young people;
- the European Youth Work Agenda, which needs to be further developed to support quality youth work, including digital youth work.

4. The role of youth organisations

Covid-19 has dramatically changed the way democratic societies function, in particular by limiting the possibility of direct human contact as a result of social distancing measures. Organisations generally state that their access to young people has been reduced by Covid-19: 31% of them indicate that their access to young people was very limited and another 52% of the organisations indicate that their access was somewhat limited. Only 17% of them do not notice any visible change (Deželan 2022).

Basic civil rights (freedom of expression, association and assembly) were also severely affected, and this was despite the fact that ICT tools offered alternative ways to address measures aimed at physical distancing. The extent to which organisations were able to participate in public deliberation and decision-making processes on issues important to them decreased during the Covid-19 pandemic from 38% of those able to fully participate in the pre-pandemic period to less than a fifth of the organisations surveyed in 2022 (Deželan 2022).

The pandemic containment measures diminished civic space for OECD-based youth organisations that are most worried about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on youth rights (72%), inequalities across age cohorts (69%), the spread of disinformation (67%), racial discrimination (61%) and political polarisation (56%). Beyond its direct impacts on young people's well-being, youth organisations also expressed concerns about broader societal effects of the Covid-19 crisis (OECD 2022).

Several national recovery plans across OECD countries outline specific measures to support vulnerable groups. Still, explicit commitments to strengthen the role of youth workers and volunteers and improve their institutional capacities are rarely mentioned (OECD 2022).

The organisations also point out that their opinions were not sought, but rather their volunteer skills and ability to deliver services were of interest to the authorities (Deželan 2022). Although nearly all surveyed OECD-based youth organisations have contributed to mitigating the impacts of Covid-19, for instance by organising (online) workshops and running information campaigns, including groups in disadvantaged circumstances, less than a third of OECD countries with a response and recovery plan explained how young people could engage in the delivery of recovery measures (OECD 2022).

Surveyed OECD-based youth organisations are rather dissatisfied with the way governments delivered public services for young people during the Covid-19 crisis, notably in the area of sports, culture and leisure (63%), education (60%), housing (56%) and employment (56%), and to a lesser extent in health (46%), transportation and mobility (36%) and justice (33%) (Eurofound 2021).

Only 33% of respondents from youth organisations in OECD countries are satisfied with how governments have collaborated across institutions and with civil society organisations to mitigate the crisis. However, in Austria, Lithuania and the Slovak Republic, public consultations included youth organisations as key stakeholders. In Austria, each measure proposed by civil society organisations, including youth organisations, was displayed in a table which included a pillar on youth and future generations (OECD 2022).

More than one in three OECD-based youth organisations (38%) estimate their members' trust in government decreased since the start of the Covid-19 crisis, whereas only 16% report an increase. Similarly, 31% say their members' satisfaction with democratic processes has decreased during the same period, while only 15% report an increase.

5. Conclusions and main findings

Work conducted under the Covid-19 Youth Knowledge Hub over the last three years, comprising data and information gathered through surveys, thematic research and meta-analysis, and findings on the impact of the pandemic on young people and the youth sector, can be presented under the following headings.

- Communication with young people
- State funding, policy and programmes
- The impact on and response of the NGO sector
- The impact on young people's quality of life and future prospects
- European recovery and resilience funding
- Future policy directions.

Communication with young people

From the onset of the pandemic, there were issues with the quality and clarity of official communications and mixed messaging resulting from lack of co-ordination among different stakeholders. While the NGO sector sought a more interactive and innovative approach in supporting young people, shortcomings were identified in sharing information and feedback and opening digital dialogue was lacking.

This points to a need for greater co-operation and co-ordination between the state and NGO sectors in communicating with, informing and seeking feedback from young people, as well as in seeking engagement and mutual support in developing and implementing youth policies.

State funding, policy and programmes

State funding for the youth sector appears to have remained relatively consistent during the pandemic, and youth policy largely unaffected, though there was evidence of some

pressures on both: reallocation or postponement in funding and delays and deferrals in policy initiatives.

Non-formal education and training programmes and services provided by the state sector for young people were severely impacted by the pandemic and young people's access to such programmes and services was limited or poor.

The need for social distancing with the onset of the pandemic and the resulting social isolation of young people were important factors in curtailing their physical access to programmes and services. This had two main consequences: deterioration in mental health and well-being and over-reliance on digitalisation.

The impact of the pandemic on the employment and working conditions of youth workers highlighted, and in some instances exacerbated, existing problems and issues. In those countries where youth work is more professionalised, youth workers appeared to have greater job security during the pandemic.

Countries with a well-established and well-funded youth sector were better positioned to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic than those countries that are largely dependent on European project-based funding, which they were unable to use because of the pandemic.

Impact on the NGO sector

The pandemic had an adverse effect on youth NGOs, in part because of the sector's dependence on European funding programmes.

Nonetheless, since the beginning of the pandemic, youth organisations have played a critical role in providing support to vulnerable groups, including older people in care facilities, disabled people, NEETs and migrants, to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic.

Many youth organisations became very active and innovative in offering alternative options or transferring face-to-face activities online. Information and counselling for young people was also moved from face-to-face contact to other media.

If voluntary youth NGOs are to be revitalised after the pandemic and further strengthened, more and regular financial support may be required to enhance their ongoing financial, physical and human resource capacities, in particular.

Impact on young people

The pandemic laid bare long-standing structural inequalities that existed prior to its outbreak. The impact was greatest on young women; young people not in education, employment or training; minority groups; adolescents and children at an increased risk of domestic violence; and migrant young people and young people with disabilities.

Vulnerable young people at risk experienced further disadvantages. Socio-economic reasons and lack of digital skills were big obstacles to participation in online activities and even distance learning became more challenging for disadvantaged young people than for others.

Many countries conducted initial surveys or research on the impact of the pandemic on young people. All attest to the severity of its impact, particularly on young people from low-income and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, young migrants, young women and young people experiencing homelessness.

The strong decrease in social contact was perceived as the most challenging issue for young people, followed by education issues (distance learning), unemployment and increased stress and anxiety. Focus on reducing inequalities and supporting young people experiencing multiple disadvantages should be an objective of all recovery measures.

European recovery and resilience funding

While the Next Generation EU initiative and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has the capacity and potential to make a positive impact on the lives and future education/career prospects of young people, particularly in areas such as climate change, digitalisation, strengthening education and employment opportunities, and promoting social cohesion and resilience, it will need to be carefully monitored and evaluated to determine its precise impacts on young people.

However, some of the more nuanced concerns articulated by young people during the pandemic – the need to be informed, consulted, and involved; mental health challenges; greater civic engagement; financial security; media literacy; and support for non-formal education and learning – are not necessarily covered by the RRF.

The youth sector may need to focus its policies and resources on core activities that both complement and underpin the RRFs – further enhancing the role, recognition and potential of youth work and youth workers, and work effectively, proactively and constructively with other sectors for the benefit of young people.

Future policy directions

Mental health and well-being emerged as the most important issue for young people. Other significant priorities identified were employment, digital skills, civic engagement, social services and non-formal education and training. The greatest concerns about the long-term implications of the Covid-19 pandemic are about the well-being of young people, the impact on youth rights and inequality.

The main challenges for youth policy were considered to be guaranteeing sustainable funding and financial support for the sector – the youth NGO sector in particular – and better access to digitalisation through enhanced digital skills and improved equipment and facilities. The pandemic showed that further promotion of equal opportunities for all young people is essential and therefore must be a mid- and long-term priority for youth policy. Together with other policy fields, youth mental health issues and unemployment, in particular, need to be further addressed.

The pandemic delivered a severe shock to the youth sector across Europe and the result was paralysis and uncertainty. From a European youth policy perspective, this might point to a need for greater flexibility, adaptability and autonomy of policy and funding at regional and

local levels. To better ensure the delivery of a fair, inclusive and resilient recovery for young people, governments can consider a range of public governance approaches, including the following.

- Adopting an integrated approach to supporting young people across all relevant sectors – both through specific sectoral policies and integrated youth strategies at the appropriate level(s) of government – raising awareness among civil servants about the impact of the crisis on young people and creating mechanisms for cross-sectoral co-operation.
- Embedding the perspectives of all age groups in response and recovery measures, including in the identification of policy priorities, design of policies, services and (support) programmes and allocation of public resources.
- Involving young people and youth organisations in building social cohesion and in the implementation of recovery efforts by promoting meaningful volunteering services and youth work through laws, strategies and adequately resourced programmes.
- Assessing and anticipating the long-term impacts of the crisis across different age groups by improving the collection, use and sharing of data and evidence disaggregated by age and all other identities young people associate with, as well as their intersections, including socio-economic status and geographic area, gender, race and ethnicity, indigeneity, migrant status and (dis)ability status.
- Building institutional, administrative and technical capacities and skills among policy makers to deliver a fair, inclusive and resilient recovery for young people.

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