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The impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector and relevance of the EU recovery and resilience plans

Authors: James O'Donovan, Sladjana Petkovic

Editors: Lana Pasic and Tanya Basarab

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1. The impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector

The EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership (hereinafter the Youth Partnership) manages the Knowledge HUB: Covid-19 impact on the youth sector, containing data and information sources on research relating to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on young people. The Knowledge Hub was launched in October 2020, collecting data at local and national levels through surveys of the two research networks managed by the Youth Partnership, including correspondents to the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCY) and members of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR), which provided timely updates on developments in different countries. Drawing on the research sources collected on the online Knowledge Hub, the Youth Partnership prepared several thematic briefings and a meta-analysis of findings on the immediate and short-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. All findings attest to severe impact, particularly on young people from low-income and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, young migrants, young women, and young people experiencing homelessness. This monitoring and analytical work continued throughout 2021 and 2022, enriching the findings and drawing relevant conclusions for European and national initiatives on adapting youth policy and youth work practice.

The aim of this briefing note is to provide a short update on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector, relying on the data available up to July 2022. The briefing also reflects on the relevance of the European recovery and resilience plans for young people in Europe in the light of the results from surveys and meta-analysis conducted in the context of the Knowledge Hub in 2020-21. Based on the surveys, **mental health and well-being** emerged as the most important issue for young people to be addressed in European Recovery Programmes. This was followed by **employment and the financial security of young people, digital skills, participation and civic engagement, social services, youth work and non-formal education and training**.

1.1. The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and well-being of young people

Despite the lifting of most Covid-19 restrictions across EU member states by spring 2022, **mental well-being levels of youth remain lower than they were at the start of the pandemic**. This could be attributed to the war in Ukraine, for which 76% of young respondents expressed high or very high concern. Nevertheless, when looking at mental well-being across different age groups, **the most significant improvement can be seen among the youngest group (18-24 years)**, although this cohort still has the lowest mental well-being of all the age groups. This is in line with previous findings that the effects of restrictions on mental well-being were strongest among younger people (Eurofound 2022).

Young people's (aged 15-24) mental health worsened significantly in 2020-21: nearly two-thirds of young people in Europe were affected by depression and anxiety, the two most common forms of mental health conditions, while young people with fewer opportunities

were more likely to be severely affected. On average, at least one in four young people (25.2%) showed clinically elevated symptoms of depression, and at least one in five (20.5%) showed clinically elevated symptoms of anxiety. These figures imply that young people experienced at least twice as many psychological difficulties compared to before the pandemic (pre-pandemic levels were 12.9% and 11.6%, for depression and anxiety, respectively). In spring 2022, the anxiety rates among the youth were, for example, higher in France (23% vs 44%), and Belgium (19% vs 24%) compared to the general population rates. The same is true for the depression rates, which are also higher among the youth in both countries (in France 15% vs 23%; in Belgium 16% vs 26%) (OECD 2021a).

Young women, young people with lower socio-economic status and without a job, reported higher rates of mental distress in 2020-21 (OECD 2021a). Close to four out of 10 unemployed young respondents indicated that they felt left out of society. Respondents with low job security are at risk of depression based on their average mental well-being score, which suggests that the feeling of job insecurity has a similar association with mental well-being as unemployment (Eurofound 2021a).

The **gender gap** for good mental health was highest among young adults aged 18-24 years. In this group men scored 74 points and women - 68 points (EIGE 2021), representing the largest drop in mental well-being. Across age and gender groups, the lowest mental well-being was registered among women aged 18-24 (Eurofound 2021a) who were more likely to self-report lower levels of life satisfaction (EIGE 2021 Gender Equality Index 2021 Report: Health) and concerns regarding body image and experiences of sexual harassment and domestic violence that were amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2021).

Another effect of the Covid-19 outbreak was reflected in **the increased need for support, coupled with delays and unmet needs of the students (32%)**, due to disrupted provisions of public services such as essential health care and mental health care (Eurofound 2021). The alarmingly high number of respondents in the youngest age group (18-24) who reported **unmet health care needs in 2021 (62%) has fallen somewhat in 2022 (49%)**, although it remains very high, particularly for respondents with low socio-economic status (Eurofound 2022).

Surveys conducted as part of the Covid-19 Knowledge Hub throughout 2020 and 2021 also reveal that **the public sector was not adequately prepared** at either national, regional or local levels for the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health and that this was due to **inadequate policy focus on their mental health needs**.

1.2. The impact of Covid-19 on youth employment and the financial security of young people

The Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on youth employment, working conditions, job search and employability, making young people a more vulnerable group in the labour market when compared with people aged 30 or over (Eurofound 2021a). Consequently, **young people faced a significantly larger rate of job loss and more financial challenges than other age groups**: in spring 2021, 17% of people aged 18-24 reported losing their job (Eurofound 2022). Marginalised young people were more than twice as likely to have stopped working while more than one in four young workers saw their income decrease (European Youth Forum 2021).

Young people were also **less protected** by job retention, income support, subsidised wages and other **welfare schemes** (OECD 2021, Eurofound 2021, European Parliament 2021, European Youth Forum 2021). As a result, many of them are in **precarious working and living situations**. The impact was particularly severe on young people from socially vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (young people in rural areas, indigenous youth, youth with a migrant background, etc.), and **young people in non-standard employment** (platform workers, youth in “flexi-jobs”, young people in dual learning programmes, traineeships or student contracts) (Eurofound 2021; OECD 2021, Eurostat survey 2021, European Parliament 2021). **Young women lost disproportionately more jobs** during the first Covid-19 wave than men. This was mainly the case for vulnerable, less educated and migrant women (EIGE 2021).

However, in spring 2022, only 9% of 18–24-year-old respondents said they lost their job during the pandemic and are still unemployed. While still above the unemployment rate for the other age groups, this **decrease in job loss among young people reflects the recovery of jobs following the reopening of sectors where youth are traditionally overrepresented**, such as hospitality and retail (Eurofound 2022).

1.3. The impact of Covid-19 on youth participation and social inclusion

The pandemic laid bare long-standing structural inequalities that existed before its outbreak. It is well documented that vulnerable groups have been hit particularly hard by the social and economic implications of Covid-19. These effects have been greater for **young women and young people in vulnerable circumstances, including those belonging to minority groups, adolescents and children facing increased risks of domestic violence, migrant youth, young people with disabilities, youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and young people in NEET category**, among others (OECD 2021, UNICEF 2021).

A recent study found that individuals who experience epidemics during their transition to adulthood display **less confidence in political leaders, governments and elections, which**

persists over their lifetime. Long-lasting scars of the crisis are therefore not only a concern when the employment and income prospects of young people are considered, but also in terms of their association with democratic processes and institutions over the life cycle (OECD 2022).

The OECD Youth and COVID-19 Survey found that respondents from youth organisations were more likely to **report a decrease in their trust in government** when they felt **government had not done enough to support vulnerable groups**. According to the 2021 survey data, only 39% of respondents in OECD countries are **satisfied with the support governments have provided to groups in vulnerable circumstances during the pandemic**. This issue is even more pronounced in non-member countries, in which only around a quarter of respondents (26%) are satisfied (OECD 2020). Trust in institutions among youth aged 18-24 has plummeted, especially trust in national governments, which fell from 4.6 in summer 2020 to 3.9 in spring 2021 (Eurofound 2021b).

Furthermore, only 33% of respondents from youth organisations in OECD countries (and 20% of respondents from non-members) are satisfied with **how governments have collaborated across institutions and with civil society organisations to mitigate the crisis**. **A majority of respondents feel that their government has not incorporated the views of young people when taking emergency measures and decisions to mitigate the crisis**. Among the respondents from OECD countries, 15% feel their government considered young people's views when adopting lockdown and confinement measures. 22% feel that young people's views were taken into account in the **purchase of goods, services and public works** and 26% somewhat or strongly agree that their views were reflected in **the design of financial schemes to mitigate the impact on jobs and income loss**. Similarly, around one in three OECD-based respondents (35%) considers that **governments have incorporated young people's views when prioritising age cohorts in vaccination campaigns** (OECD 2021b).

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. However, young people's perceptions of capacities of democratic governments to handle the crisis (e.g. Covid-19 pandemic or climate crisis) might cast doubts on the overall ability of democracies to handle long-term, complex and interconnected challenges and invest in long-term priorities over short-term considerations (OECD 2021b).

When **governments communicate proactively and engage citizens in the policy cycle**, they can generate citizen buy-in and engagement, including among young people. **The state sector's communication with young people during the pandemic, however, tended to be one-dimensional and directional.** The main challenges related to the quality and clarity of state communication 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 in sharing information and feedback and opening up dialogue using digital media were evident (European Commission 2021).

1.4. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth work and youth organisations

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 its impacts (OECD 2020). While evidence from the analysis of national recovery plans across OECD countries shows that several of them outline specific measures to support vulnerable groups, explicit commitments to strengthen youth workers, volunteers and their institutional capacities are rarely mentioned (OECD 2022).

Youth organisations' activities were severely affected by the pandemic. Very few organisations were prepared for the shift, and a limited number of projects were suited to online formats. Youth workers and project managers initiated digital youth work activities, keeping both volunteers and target groups involved (RAY Network 2021).

Digital youth work activities therefore changed from complementary to core activities when face-to-face youth work service delivery became impossible. However, digital youth work comes with limitations for those who are at risk of digital exclusion. Lack of or limited accessibility to digital youth work content might result in young people's exclusion from digital youth work activities, impacting their right to participate (Lonean and Escamilla 2021, Chupina 2021). Many youth organisations were not able to implement their projects – youth workers were lacking digital skills and equipment. Project participants faced numerous challenges to access digital youth work activities (RAY Network 2021). Many youth organisations also outlined **limitations related to implementing youth work digitally**. Among others, lack of face-to-face activities has had a negative impact on the mental health of youth workers and the quality of youth work itself. From digital fatigue caused by spending too much time online during the pandemic, to feelings of inadequacy because of a lack of digital competences or digital technologies to fully engage in youth work, many argued that while digital spaces have offered temporary relief during the Covid-19 crisis, they cannot substitute offline forms of youth engagement (Pawluczuk 2022).

Mobility learning activities, internship programmes or regular youth work services were also cancelled. The pandemic brought fragile pathways of youth workers towards quality learning opportunities – most of them had to rapidly adapt, to challenge their autonomous learning competences while dealing with limited social contact and struggling to keep their organisations and projects running (Potočnik and Ivanian 2022).

The **need for more sustained and operational funding** as opposed to shorter term project-based funding, and the need to improve the **recognition of youth work**, have remained

priorities among youth workers across Europe since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (European Commission 2021a). The studies underline that since Covid-19, the need for further financial support is more critical for **private youth work organisations** which may not have core financial support from governments and for organisations in countries with practice architectures in need of development. **Small organisations** have limited capacity to adapt their fundraising strategies and to access funds designed to support their recovery after Covid-19. Therefore, **small organisations face the risk of closure** in the near future (European Commission 2021a; O'Donovan and Zentner 2020; Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021; Escamilla et al. 2021). Furthermore, **future strategic approaches to digital youth work** should consider how digital inequalities might impact on young people's transition into adulthood and their needs, interests and aspirations. Equally important is a critical and ongoing analysis of how digital inequalities affect youth workers and youth organisations (Pawluczuk 2022).

2. NextGenerationEU Recovery and Resilience Plans: relevance for young people

NextGenerationEU is a temporary instrument to help the economy in European Union member states recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is the centrepiece of the instrument with some €724 billion in loans and grants available to support reforms and investments being undertaken by EU countries. The aim is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions.

As of the end of July 2022, all EU member states had submitted Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) and all had been approved and endorsed by the European Commission and the European Council, with the exception of the Netherlands and Hungary (European Commission 2022).

The RRF appears to have promoted member states' commitment to policy reform, and approximately a third of all the measures included in RRFs adopt such an approach. It also promotes multi-country projects or cross-border initiatives and the European Commission has regular exchanges with the European Parliament to discuss horizontal issues, which presumably would include youth-related matters.

The implementation of the RRF is also the subject of increasing inter-institutional dialogue at European level with both the European Parliament and the Council of the EU.

The RRF Regulation 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. The RRF will provide grants amounting to some €338 billion, at current prices, and loans amounting to some €390 billion, at current prices, to member states over its duration. The six pillars comprise:

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

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2.1. Relevance of the RRF for young people

In the context of the relevance of the RRF for young people across Europe, several points can be emphasised:

- while youth is mentioned specifically in **only one of the pillars (Pillar 6)** – which also has the lowest level of estimated expenditure – the pillars tend to overlap, and it is not always clear how the pillars will impact specifically on young people;
- the **cross-country allocation of grants** largely depends on the level of development, suggesting that the RRF could contribute to convergence for the economically less well-off countries;
- there appears to be little association with regard to Gross National Income (GNI) growth from 2019 to 2021, suggesting that the RRF is **not** primarily a crisis-alleviation tool or a direct consequent response to the pandemic, but rather an investment in **long-term strategic priorities** that, for the most part, predate the pandemic;
- the RRF is for EU member states only and does **not** extend to non-EU states in Europe.

Neighbourhood co-operation priorities might align in the longer term with the EU policy priorities for the current multi-annual financial framework, albeit at much reduced funding, co-operation and support potential, with priority for candidate countries, hence potentially leading to more speeds of implementation and exclusion.

Member states also took **different approaches when consulting with relevant stakeholders** in preparing and developing their RRFs. Public consultation was conducted in various formats and at different levels with regional, city and municipal authorities, social partners, NGOs and other representatives of civil society, political parties, business associations, trade unions, environmental and consumer organisations. While young people form part of NGOs and other civil society organisations, **only a minority of member states appear to have consulted directly with youth organisations** and there appears to have been **no direct consultation with young people** as a constituency.

The broad spectrum of RRP address many of the concerns expressed by young people in the wake of the pandemic, such as: climate change and green transition, employment and labour market access, enhanced educational and training opportunities, digital up-skilling, and improved and more accessible social and health services. However, when it comes to **referencing young people and their needs and concerns in the RRP**, the picture is more nuanced and mixed.

2.2. RRP on education and training and labour market access

The areas that most refer to young people are in the fields of **education and training and labour market access**.

Pillar 4, Social and Territorial Cohesion, for example, focuses on:

- adult education (including continuous vocational education and training and recognition and validation of skills);
- modernisation of labour market institutions (including employment services and forecasting of skills and labour inspectorates; employment protection and organisation).

Pillar 6, Policies for the Next Generation, Children and Youth, focuses on:

- general, vocational, and higher education;
- accessibility, affordability, quality and inclusiveness (including digitisation and infrastructure);
- youth employment support and youth job creation (including hiring and job transition incentives and support for self-employment).

Business environmental entrepreneurship and green jobs are also mentioned under other pillars.

Many RRP include measures to **support improvements in quality and inclusiveness** in general school education. Half of the RRP include measures to support the transformation of and access to higher education. Eighteen of the RRP include reforms or investments in digital education.

Measures to support **youth employment** include subsidies for apprenticeships, investments to customise public employment service for young people, to improve youth coaching and individual guidance for employment and autonomy, and schemes to incentivise hiring of young people by the private sector.

2.3. RRP of individual member states include:

- investment for the development of digital skills among youth to support them in gaining or regaining their footing in the labour market;

- measures to address labour market challenges and strengthen the social and labour market integration of vulnerable groups;
- raising the employment rate and improving the competences and skills among youth in view of the twin transition (decarbonising the economy and adopting a circular development model);
- supporting apprenticeship opportunities for young people from vulnerable backgrounds to obtain the skills necessary to keep up with the requirements of the education system and the labour market;
- investment and reforms to improve the digital skills of young people and increase their awareness on the effects of climate change and technological transformation of the economy;
- promoting reskilling and up-skilling;
- programmes specifically aimed at widening the professional horizons of young people from underprivileged or rural areas;
- programmes targeting young jobseekers, including work-based training in public school workshops or first professional experience in public administrations, and professional opportunities for young researchers.

The Spanish RRP focuses on reforms and investments in education, digital skills and the labour market aimed at supporting young people in particular. In the RRP of Poland and Ireland, the focus is on matching of skills and qualifications and developing the necessary digital skills and supports for young people's participation in the labour market. Similarly, in Portugal a proposed digital school aims to increase young people's participation in meeting the country's business needs. In Lithuania, the focus is on taking up and staying in employment through the acquisition of competences in high value-added areas.

Supporting schools in developing ICT policies and the digital up-skilling of teachers (Belgium); a "My First Job" measure aimed at providing relevant working experience for young people (Estonia); and provision of digital end-user devices for pupils (Austria) also reflect the focus in RRP on the need for digital up-skilling and labour market participation.

There are also a range of measures proposed to strengthen and broaden access to the labour market and enhance digital skills in particular.

The Belgian RRP seeks to address labour market challenges and strengthen the social and labour market integration of vulnerable groups, such as people with a migrant background, women, young people, people with disabilities, prisoners and people at risk of digital exclusion. In Italy, targeted labour market reforms and investment aim to improve the employment prospects of young women in particular, and other actions focus on gender equality. In France, a dedicated programme aims to widen the professional horizons of

185 000 young people, mainly from underprivileged or rural areas, and provides for personalised guidance for employment and autonomy.

Measures to encourage the inclusion of workers with disabilities and young people in the labour market (Slovenia); support for apprenticeships and help for students with Covid-19-related learning disadvantages (Germany); re- and up-skilling for people with migrant backgrounds (Denmark); activation of support for women and people with caring responsibilities (Cyprus); and inclusion of vulnerable groups such as young people at risk of early school leaving, low-skilled people and those with disabilities (Malta) all attest to a strong focus in RRP on creating a more skilled and inclusive labour market environment.

2.4. RRP on social inclusion

This focus on education, training and up-skilling is complemented by actions aimed at greater social inclusion.

Pillar 4, Supporting Social and Territorial Cohesion, stresses the need for:

- social housing and other social infrastructure;
- social protection (including social services and integration of vulnerable groups);
- development of rural and remote areas.

RRPs place particular emphasis on the need for individual member states to focus on the **implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, including the promotion of policies for children and young people** and to mitigate the economic and social impact of the pandemic.

RRPs of individual member states focus on:

- reducing social vulnerabilities, particularly of children and young people with a disadvantaged socio-economic background;
- targeted policies for children and youth that reduce social vulnerabilities;
- strengthening health services;
- housing for disadvantaged and marginalised groups, including young people and young families;
- developing social mentoring services that support hard-to-reach groups;
- investment in student housing.

Investment in housing for young people is evident in a number of RRP. Renovation of social housing, schools, universities, sport, youth and cultural infrastructure, and training facilities (Belgium); targeted housing for the socially disadvantaged and marginalised groups, including young people and young families (Slovenia); enhancing young people's access to adequate

housing and childcare (Spain); and investment in student housing (Sweden) reflect a concern in RRP to address the housing and accommodation needs of young people.

Croatia aims to develop social mentoring services that support hard-to-reach groups such as people with disabilities, victims of violence, homeless people, migrants, Roma and young people leaving the social welfare system and seeking employment. Slovakia's RRP provides for inclusive measures to prevent any form of discrimination of more vulnerable groups such as young people with disabilities or young people living in rural areas.

2.5. RRP on health and social services

Only some RRP refer specifically to substantially improving health services, strengthening the primary health care sector, promoting prevention services and delivering mental health and home care services, up-scaling long-term and mental health services (Finland, Greece, Portugal and Slovakia), and increasing efficiency through the digitalisation of health services (Germany). With respect to young people, the overall focus in RRP appears to be, on balance, **more in the areas of education, up-skilling and labour market than in the direction of social services.**

2.6. RRP on youth work and non-formal learning

RRP appear to reference sparsely or not at all core youth sector issues, such as non-formal learning, youth work, youth information, voluntary participation, human rights and relevant supports, services and resources.

Finland's RRP aims at integrating one-stop-shop services for young people, and the extension of integrated work capacity and mental health services to new regions. In Italy, an initiative will mobilise young volunteers for projects dedicated to training people at risk of digital exclusion (particularly the elderly). Bulgaria's RRP will invest in the setting up of youth centres to foster young people's skills, including digital skills, with a focus on young people from vulnerable groups, including Roma.

Apart from occasional references to "project-based learning" (Slovenia), "non-formal training system and flexible learning pathways" (Estonia), and "youth coaching" (Austria), the various forms of learning referred to in the RRP – adult learning, lifelong learning, continuous learning, digital learning, distance learning – **do not appear to consider non-formal learning.**

Similarly, **youth work, youth information, voluntary participation and human rights do not appear to be considered and can at best be only inferred.**

3. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic clearly caused a severe shock for the youth sector across Europe. Young people, in general, were socially isolated, inadequately supported and often offered uneven responses to their educational, learning and mental health and other needs by the **state sector**.

To restore trust in governments and the EU, it will be essential to understand and address young people's needs in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. The future of Europe debate has an important role to play in reaching out and listening to young citizens' concerns, particularly as the EU recovers from the pandemic and moves to a greener, more digital EU economy. From a European youth policy perspective, this might point to a need for **greater flexibility, adaptability and autonomy at regional and local levels** in terms of both policy and funding or a comprehensive review of youth policy mechanisms to respond to crises or particularly challenging events affecting young people.

Furthermore, conclusions may be drawn on **the impact and relevance of the RRP for young people, youth organisations, and the youth sector and youth policy.**

- While RRP may contribute to convergence between better-off and less well-off countries within the EU, they may **further accentuate differences** between EU member states and non-EU countries with aspirations for joining the EU in the future (having obtained candidate status) or not in Europe. This could further widen the existing north/west and south/east divide in the youth sector in Europe.
- RRP in general, while **not necessarily age-specific**, address many of the concerns expressed by young people in the wake of the pandemic: climate change and green transition, employment and labour market access, enhanced educational and training opportunities, digital up-skilling, and improved and more accessible social and health services.
- The **primary focus** of RRP with respect to young people is on formal education and training, up-skilling and labour market access. Issues such as access to social services, including health services, and civic participation are **less evident**.
- Although concerns about young people's mental health and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic are confirmed by existing studies, the true picture of young people's well-being is likely to be more complex than evidenced so far and will only become visible in the coming years. However, social distancing resulting in stress, anxiety and mental health issues and the positive and negative aspects of digitalisation and social media **do not appear to be adequately addressed in RRP**.
- Core youth sector issues – non-formal learning, youth work, youth information, voluntary participation and human rights – and youth policy resilience and recovery are **sparsely referenced or largely absent**.

Finally, while the RRF and the RRP are meant to be a mechanism of renewal and recovery, they appear to be lacking in any proposals for developing crisis-management policies and mechanisms for the youth sector, despite these proving extremely useful since the onset of the pandemic. The impact of Covid-19 has re-emphasised that young people have multidimensional lives that require **multidimensional responses** and that sectors such as youth may need to tailor and prioritise their policy ambitions and resources accordingly.

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