

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'European Commission White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth'

(COM(2001) 681 final)

(2002/C 149/18)

On 17 January 2002, the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the 'European Commission White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth'.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 10 April 2002. The rapporteur was Mrs Hassett, the co-rapporteurs were Mr Rodríguez García-Caro and Mr Soares.

At its 390th plenary session, held on 24 and 25 April 2002 (meeting of 25 April), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 72 votes to one with one abstention.

1. White Paper — 'A new impetus for European Youth'

1.1. The Committee welcomes the European Commission White Paper 'A New Impetus for European Youth', presented on 21 November 2001. It is in full support of this policy initiative, which has the potential to create a new dynamic for tackling the challenges faced by young people in Europe, the Committee calls on the Commission to swiftly develop specific actions and allocate the necessary resources for their implementation.

1.2. In November 2000, the Committee adopted a comprehensive own-initiative opinion in anticipation of the announced publication of the European Commission's White Paper: Youth Policy. On the basis of this opinion, the Committee played a pro-active role in facilitating the consultation process. In co-operation with the European Commission and the European Youth Forum, the Committee convened a Hearing on Youth Policy with over 200 participants, representing youth organisations, trade unions, employers and other organisations active in the field of youth, coming both from the European Union and pre-accession countries. The Hearing produced a wealth of contributions and written submissions⁽¹⁾, which were published and consequently served as a basis for continued involvement of the Committee in the consultation⁽²⁾.

1.3. The Committee identified youth employment and social integration, education and mobility, participation and

civil society as crucial elements of youth policy⁽³⁾. It is thus with concern that the Committee notes the limited scope of the White Paper's priorities and therefore urges the European Commission to place the improvement of young people's social situation at the heart of all future youth policy endeavours. The Committee furthermore regrets that the White Paper remains tacit about the participation of pre-accession countries.

2. General Comments on the White Paper — 'A new impetus for European youth'

2.1. The White Paper outlines the Commission's suggestions to the member states and the regions of Europe for putting youth-related measures into practice. Substantial annexes include a synthesis of the results of the consultation process and an overview of existing Community policies and programmes, which are aimed at or affect young people. In response, the White Paper suggests a new framework for European co-operation comprising of two main aspects:

- applying the open method of co-ordination in the specific field of youth;
- taking better account of the 'youth' dimension in other policy initiatives.

2.2. The European Commission states the emergence of four key messages from the consultation process: 'Active citizenship for young people', 'Expanding and recognising areas of experimentation', 'Developing autonomy among young people', and 'For a European Union as

⁽¹⁾ Report of the Hearing on Youth Policy, 20 February 2001, Economic and Social Committee. <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/youth/ywp/civil.html>.

⁽²⁾ Swedish Presidency Seminar on Conditions for Young People in Europe, Umeå, 16-17 March 2001; Public Hearing on Youth, European Parliament Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport, 24 April 2001; Belgian Presidency, Hebe's Dream: Colloquium Gent, 26-28 November 2001; Spanish Presidency, Europe and Youth: a new impetus, European Youth Gathering Murcia, 9-12 March 2002.

⁽³⁾ EESC Own initiative Opinion, White Paper: Youth Policy, OJ C 116, 20.4.2001.

a champion of values'. On the basis of these messages, the European Commission has identified four priority themes for applying the open method of coordination:

- participation;
- information;
- voluntary service among young people;
- promoting a greater understanding of youth.

2.3. In four additional policy areas, the European Commission suggests to take more account of youth, by utilising the policies and actions in place and in the application of the various instruments available (such as: the existing open methods of co-ordination and action plans). These policy areas are:

- education, lifelong learning and mobility;
- employment;
- social Integration;
- young people against racism and xenophobia.

2.4. The Committee understands this 'taking more account of youth in other policies', as a form of youth mainstreaming in other policy areas. In current Community policy both equal opportunities and the environment have been mainstreamed⁽¹⁾. If this proposal is to be followed-up, there is a clear need for the Commission to take its responsibility to initiate policy and propose, on the basis of a Communication, a strategy outlining how youth can be taken into account effectively in other policy areas ('youth mainstreaming').

2.5. The four priorities themes for applying the open method of co-ordination, though, reflect a limited view of the 'specific field of youth'. It is difficult to envisage their policy impact and significant added value to national and regional youth policies, which to a large extent already have a much broader remit.

⁽¹⁾ European Commission Communication 'Incorporating equal opportunities for women and men into all Community policies and activities' COM(96) 67 final. Currently each Directorate General in the European Commission is responsible for mainstreaming equal opportunities into its policy areas. This work is given direction by the Group of Commissioners on Equal Opportunities and supported by an Inter-Service Group on Gender Equality.

2.6. The European Commission proposes to address these four 'youth specific' priorities through an open method of co-ordination. Though the proposal of an open method of co-ordination is to be welcomed, the defined priorities and suggestions can to a large extent be addressed appropriately through incentive measures and recommendations on the basis of Articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty. These priorities can also to a large extent be addressed through activities in the framework of the existing Community programmes as well as a Union-wide youth information strategy.

2.7. After Commissioner Reding announced a White Paper in November 1999 a multi-stranded and highly inclusive consultation process was launched. This process has been skilfully managed by the European Commission displaying a high degree of flexibility and willingness to adapt the process to the specificity of the youth sector in Europe. The Committee commends the European Commission and trusts that this open approach will continue in the future.

2.8. However, it is important to recall that the consultation was based on thematic dimensions proposed by the European Commission. The consultation actively involved young people, youth organisations, youth researchers, civil society as well as policy-makers and administrations on all levels. The annex of the White Paper reflects the results of the consultations in a thematic structure⁽²⁾, which was initially drawn-up by the European Commission itself:

- participation;
- education;
- employment, vocational training and social inclusion;
- well-being, individual autonomy and culture;
- European values, mobility and relations with the rest of the world.

⁽²⁾ It is important to note that although the 'Commission has tried to reproduce as faithfully as possible the proposals which emerged from the consultation in order to pass them on to Europe's decision-makers', it also includes a disclaimer that 'the suggestions ... do not necessarily reflect the Commission's views'. European Commission White Paper 'A New Impetus for European Youth', COM(2001) 681 final, p. 23.

2.9. The thematically structured consultation process set expectations and encouraged the various actors in the youth field to elaborate valuable and specific policy proposals. The extent to which the White Paper actually reflects the results of the consultation is unsatisfactory, in particular as it is difficult to see the link to the four 'youth specific' priorities outlined in the White Paper. These priorities can only be considered a first step as they only partly address the issues set out for consultation.

3. Methodology

3.1. The White Paper: A New Impetus for Youth proposes an open method of co-ordination in the field of youth. The proposal to introduce the open method of co-ordination in the field of youth policy is largely unprecedented in the sense that the initiative did not formally come from the European Council and the measures proposed are not presented as promoting the key political objectives of the Union. The open method of co-ordination, which has been used in key policy fields such as economic and employment policy, including their education dimension, was formalised as a method for co-ordinating policies at the European level by the Heads of State and Government at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. The Lisbon European Council conclusions both define the method and its use to promote the strategic goals of the European Union⁽¹⁾. In this sense, the open method of co-ordination has to date been initiated in order to promote the co-ordination of policies, which are a Member State competence, but which are nevertheless crucial for the Union to become: 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'⁽²⁾.

3.2. More recently, the European Commission's White Paper on European Governance proposed that the open method of co-ordination should be used on a case-by-case basis to 'achieve defined Treaty objectives and encourage co-operation, the exchange of best practice and agreeing common targets and guidelines for the Member States'⁽³⁾. Moreover, the Governance White Paper also clarified the role of the various institutions in implementing the open method of co-ordination, emphasising that the Commission should play an active co-ordinating role.

3.3. In order to be successful, the methodology proposed in the White Paper on Youth needs adaptation as it does not reflect entirely either the description in the Lisbon European Council conclusions or in the White Paper on Governance. A clear articulation of the process of open method of co-ordination needs to be developed, in the same way that occurred for the European Employment Strategy or the Social Inclusion Process. It is indispensable that beyond the involvement of member states, binding mechanism for the participation of the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions as well as most importantly of young people and their organisations, such as the European Youth Forum, are developed.

3.4. The methodology proposed in the White Paper requires a high-level of co-ordination and policy capacity in the European Commission. The Committee would like to see this level of ambition met by adequate resources for the Directorate dealing with Youth. In this respect it is to be noted that the Commission was not yet in the position to explore the whole range of instruments offered by Articles 149 and 150. In particular Recommendations of the European Commission (Article 149(4)) should be used to develop the co-operation in the youth field on the basis of the community method that will accompany the development of the open method of co-ordination.

3.5. Furthermore, the Committee would like to have more clarification on its own role and that of civil society organisations, in particular youth organisations, in the cycle of the open method of co-ordination. It should be recalled that paragraph 38 of the Lisbon European Council conclusions describes a role for NGOs in the Open Method Coordination⁽⁴⁾.

3.6. The Committee underlines the importance of developing youth policy objectives. These should be developed in a clear framework in which the respective institutions can assume their roles, in particular the European Commission.

(1) Presidency Conclusions, Lisbon European Council, 23 and 24 March 2000, paragraph 37.

(2) Presidency Conclusions, Lisbon European Council, 23 and 24 March 2000.

(3) European Governance, A White Paper, COM(2001) 428 final.

(4) Paragraph 38 of the Lisbon conclusions states a method of benchmarking best practices on managing change will be devised by the European Commission networking with different providers and users, namely the social partners, companies and NGOs.

4. Involvement of Civil Society

4.1. Any policy aimed at young people must be characterised by the fundamental principle of youth participation; a principle that is reiterated at European and international level⁽¹⁾. The Committee underlines the basic principle that young people and youth organisations should be involved in the formulation of and decision-making on youth policy at local, regional, national and Community levels⁽²⁾. The Committee welcomes the emphasis on promoting the participation of young people in the White Paper, and would like to see a more coherent articulation of this principle in the proposed policy-implementation.

4.2. The Committee notes that many actors in the consultation process in particular the young, have expressed disappointment about the lack of ambition in addressing the social and economic situation of young people⁽³⁾. On the basis of its own-initiative opinion and the results of the Civil Society Hearing on Youth Policy, the Committee supports the reservations raised about the extent to which the White Paper actually reflects the articulated policy challenges.

4.3. The Committee regrets that the European Commission has missed an opportunity to fully understand and recognise the existence, development, and variety of European civil society in the youth field. While in particular youth organisations have taken many initiatives to contribute at various levels and stages to the White Paper, there is an apparent lack of appreciation of their contributions and role in the process. Consequently, and in contradiction to the White Paper on European Governance, the measures proposed in the Youth White Paper do not fully ensure a meaningful role for civil society and its representative organisations. In this context the Committee notes with disappointment the ambiguous statements and proposals with regard to the European Youth Forum, which indicate misconceptions about the functions and independent nature of civil society organisations.

(1) Declaration of the United Nations on the International Year of Youth 1985, 'Peace, Participation, Development'; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; European Charter on Participation of Young People in Municipal and Regional Life of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe, 1992; Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe 'On Young People and Participation', 1997; Resolution of Council and Ministers for Youth meeting within the Council of the 8 February 1999 (OJ C 42, 17.2.1999, p.1).

(2) EESC Own initiative Opinion, White Paper: Youth Policy, OJ C 116, 20.4.2001.

(3) The response included: National Youth Council of Ireland 'A Missed Opportunity to put Youth at the Centre of Europe' initial response, incorporating the views of the group of Irish young people involved in the White Paper Consultative Conference; ETUC Youth Reaction to European Commission White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth; European Youth Forum response, 0011-02 White Paper. ESC Own initiative Opinion, White Paper: Youth Policy, OJ C 116, 20.4.2001.

4.4. As affirmed by the Laeken European Council, progressing European integration requires the substantiation of the concept of European citizenship in order to bridge the increasing gap between the European Union and young people⁽⁴⁾. While the White Paper states a 'citizenship deficit', the European Commission does not fully explore the potential that civil society organisations, including youth organisations, offer for active citizenship⁽⁵⁾. The Committee therefore reiterates that appropriate support and recognition should be given specifically to International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations, as they have a play a unique role to involve young people directly in the European construction⁽⁶⁾.

5. From Impetus to Dynamics

On the basis of the pro-active role the Committee has played throughout the process leading to the publication of the White Paper, the Committee:

5.1. commends the European Commission for having made a qualitative leap forward in the promotion of European co-operation in the youth field;

5.2. trusts that the open approach of consultation and policy formulation in the youth field will continue in the future youth policy development, for which the White Paper and its process of development have created some promising building blocks;

5.3. recommends that the European Commission adopt a broader conception based on objectives, in line with the Committee's proposal on an integrated and cross-sectoral youth policy, when developing policies in the youth field;

5.4. calls upon the European Commission to revisit the results of the consultations, in order to define more comprehensively the issues for which the open method of co-ordination is applied and to publish a Communication laying out how youth is effectively taken into account in other key policy areas;

(4) The Laeken Declaration states that the Union needs to resolve the basic challenge of 'how to bring the citizens, and primarily the young, closer to the European design and the European institutions'. 'The Future of the European Union — Laeken Declaration' 15 December 2001.

(5) Contribution of Lynne Chisholm to the Public Hearing on Youth, European Parliament Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport, 24 April 2001.

(6) The European Union grants support to International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations through budget line A3029 of the General Budget of the European Communities. International Non-Governmental Youth Organisation (INGYO) is a generic term that includes all youth organisations, organisations of young professionals, youth branches of trade unions, political youth movements etc.

5.5. calls upon the European Commission to prepare, regularly, a regular report on the situation of young people in Europe and to forward it to the Council and the European Parliament as well as the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions;

5.6. calls upon the European Commission to inform the Committee how the recommendations of its Opinion of November 2000 and the results of the Civil Society Hearing organised in February 2001 are reflected in the White Paper and how they can be dealt with in the proposed new framework of European co-operation in the youth field;

5.7. calls upon the Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament to increase the Community Budget allocation for Education and Youth from 0,5% to 1%;

5.8. calls upon the European Commission to swiftly develop specific actions and allocate the necessary resources for their implementation. Resources for the follow-up of the White Paper must in no case derive from re-allocating funds of the existing Youth programme;

5.9. notes that the Commission proposes 'setting up a high-level working group to advise it and the Council of Ministers, in its various configurations' to examine the issues surrounding autonomy for young people. The Committee offers its support and expertise to the working of this group;

5.10. recommends that the European Commission give a sharper profile to policy on children and young people⁽¹⁾ by

⁽¹⁾ European Economic and Social Committee opinion on 'Exploitation of children and sex tourism' (OJ C 284, 14.9.1998).

setting up a specific Directorate for Children and Young People within the Directorate General for Education and Culture, the main tasks of which should initially be to give concrete shape to, and to implement, the measures proposed in the White Paper and to implement the Youth programme;

5.11. calls upon the European Commission and the Council to involve the applicant countries as early and as widely as possible not only in the implementation of the White Paper but also in the discussion on the further outlook for youth policy in the European Union;

5.12. calls upon the Convention on the Future of Europe to examine in depth the issue of the status of young people in Europe and to send a clear signal to all forces in society to actively involve young people in the process of building an enlarged and more democratic European Union;

5.13. offers its availability to the Convention on the Future of Europe to facilitate the participation of young people and their organisations in this process, both through its three observers in the Convention and through support to the announced 'youth convention';

5.14. considers that, in connection with the forthcoming revision of the Treaties, a specific article on youth policy should be included in the European Community Treaty providing at least for the Community to promote co-operation between member states on youth policy and, where necessary, to complement their activities; and calls on the Council of Ministers responsible for Youth to support this proposal with an appropriate resolution.

Brussels, 25 April 2002.

*The President
of the Economic and Social Committee*

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