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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL**

**on European policies concerning youth participation and information**

**Follow-up to the White Paper on a New Impetus for European Youth :  
Implementing the common objectives for participation by and information for young  
people in view of promoting their active European citizenship**

{SEC(2006) 1006}

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. A key moment

Youth policies are of crucial importance to the objectives of the European Union (EU). They stand at the crossroads between the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs and citizenship policies, seeking to both facilitate young people's transition into the labour market and develop their active citizenship.

Young people are neither a static nor a homogeneous group and their demands and means of expression have evolved constantly. The proportion of young people in the European population is declining and entry into adulthood is occurring later. Young people's career paths have become increasingly individualised and their transition into the labour market can sometimes be difficult. Furthermore, the interest of young people in public affairs is declining, with the attendant risk of a citizenship deficit.

The purpose of this document is to assess the follow up given by Member States to the common objectives on participation by and information for young people adopted by the Council in 2003 under the youth Open Method of Coordination and to make suggestions for further improvements. It is accompanied by a staff working document providing a detailed analysis of the Member States' national reports for participation and information.

This reporting exercise is however also part of a wider set of actions carried out by the European Union to connect Europe to its citizens and comes at a key moment of the debate on the future of the EU<sup>1</sup>.

In its White Paper on a European Communication Policy<sup>2</sup> and in its Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate<sup>3</sup>, the Commission recently restated the need to give citizens - in particular the young - the tools to actively participate in the European decision shaping process and to reinforce their sense of ownership of the European project. This message was confirmed at the highest political level<sup>4</sup> as well as by young people themselves who expressed their will to play a bigger role in the development of the European Union and thereby develop their active European citizenship<sup>5</sup>. Their call should be answered and the principle of involving young people in European affairs, already highlighted in the White Paper for youth<sup>6</sup> published by the Commission in 2001, should be further reinforced.

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<sup>1</sup> Communication on a citizens' agenda (COM (2006) 211).

<sup>2</sup> COM (2006) 35 final of 1.2.2006, White Paper on a European Communication Policy, Debating Europe, Involving people.

<sup>3</sup> COM (2005) 494 final of 13.10.2005; Communication on the period of reflection and Plan D (COM (2006) 212).

<sup>4</sup> See Presidency Conclusions of 15-16 June 2006 European Council welcoming European Commission's contribution to the reflection period and encouraging the Commission to continue and strengthen efforts to foster dialogue with citizens.

<sup>5</sup> "Youth takes the floor" Young Europeans' concerns and expectations as to the development of the European Union, analysis from Standard Eurobarometer 63, publication December 2005

<sup>6</sup> 14441/01 – COM (2001) 681 final

Several initiatives have been developed in the youth field since the adoption of the White Paper for youth. This reflects the growing importance of youth policies in Europe and in the Member States.

The White paper notably led to the adoption in 2002<sup>7</sup> of a framework of European cooperation in the youth field in which Member States agreed, on the one hand, to mainstream youth in certain key policies for young people's social inclusion and professional integration and, on the other hand, to develop their active and responsible citizenship.

As for the active citizenship strand of the framework of European cooperation, Member States agreed to focus on four youth specific priorities to which they would apply an Open Method of Coordination (OMC), namely participation, information, voluntary activities and a greater knowledge and understanding of youth. Common objectives were subsequently adopted by Member States for participation and information<sup>8</sup> in 2003 followed by voluntary activities<sup>9</sup> and a greater knowledge of youth<sup>10</sup> in 2004. As part of the youth OMC, Member States have undertaken to report on the implementation of the different priorities over a four year period. This is consequently a key moment for youth policies as this Communication marks the first time that implementation reports have been presented to the Commission. The experience drawn from this first reporting exercise on the participation and information priorities should serve as useful experience for the reports on the two remaining priorities, namely voluntary activities (end 2006) and greater knowledge and understanding of youth (end 2008). It will also feed into the general evaluation of the youth framework of European cooperation at the end of 2009.

The mainstreaming of youth in certain key policies for young people, advocated in the White Paper for Youth as a second pillar for developing youth policies, was strongly reinforced in 2005 by the adoption of the European Youth Pact<sup>11</sup>, giving special focus on integrating young people in professional and social life in the revised Lisbon strategy.

The policy framework is complemented by the YOUTH programme, which is recognised as a valuable resource for promoting the active European citizenship of young people as well as their integration in society. These objectives will be reinforced in the future "Youth in action" programme.

## **1.2. General assessment of the situation**

In their reports, Member States generally recognise the leverage effect which actions in favour of young people have on society as a whole. This confirms the importance of an intergenerational and life cycle approach to youth policies.

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<sup>7</sup> O.J. C 168, 13.7.2002, p.2

<sup>8</sup> O.J. C 295, 5.12.2003, p.6

<sup>9</sup> Council doc. 13996/04, 15.11.2004, not published

<sup>10</sup> Council doc. 13997/04, 15.11.2004, not published

<sup>11</sup> Annex 1 of Presidency Conclusions of the European Council (7619/05)

They acknowledge that the European priorities for participation and information have imparted an impetus to national youth policies and remain essential for developing the active citizenship of young people.

They however recognise that efforts still need to be made and that the process will be rewarding provided that Member States - in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity - continue to cooperate with each other and with regional and local authorities on their own territory.

Involving young people, including those with fewer opportunities, at all levels in policy development and implementation is fundamental for sustainable policy making and participative democracy. The dialogue already being developed between young people and the European institutions should thus be further developed.

## **2. INFORMATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **2.1. Implementation of the common objectives for information**

#### *2.1.1. Access for young people to information*

While Member States have developed a number of information tools for young people, only around 12 have set up an information strategy addressing all questions of interest to young people and integrating the local, regional, national and European levels.

Member States highlight youth information web sites as the main information dissemination tools. A national youth portal currently exists in 19 Member States. The creation of the European youth portal in 2003 and the links it builds towards national portals has proven very successful. They recognize that this has enhanced cross-ministerial cooperation and exchanges in the field of youth information.

Member States also show a clear will to further develop personalised information offices and to address the issue of young people with fewer opportunities being excluded from information channels, notably by helping them access information society tools such as the internet.

Content wise, action mainly concentrated on issues such as free time, youth organisations and voluntary activities, sometimes neglecting information on participation, education, employment and travelling in Europe.

In the **UK** (England), Connexions Direct (CXD), the national online advice, information and support service for young people offers advice by telephone, text message, “on line” advisers and email. In **Slovenia**, youth information and counselling centres pay specific attention to the young Romany population. In **Cyprus** and **Spain**, mobile units were created for informing young people in rural areas.

#### *2.1.2. Quality information*

Most Member States use the European youth information charter to ensure quality standards of information provided by youth information services.

The role of networking is also seen as essential to improve the skills and qualifications of youth information workers. The European networks of EURODESK, ERYICA and EYCA play a crucial role in the development of training courses for their members.

In **France**, 32 youth information centres funded by the national authorities have their own staff training structure to ensure that quality standards are met. The European youth information charter is applied together with additional national quality standards. European youth information networks have put together a compendium of quality initiatives.

### 2.1.3. *Participation by young people in information*

Virtually no measures have been taken by the Member States to implement this common objective. A limited number of national reports however indicate that young people or youth organisations can be consulted on information strategies or on the development of information material.

In **Slovakia**, youth information centres cooperate with volunteers who disseminate youth information in schools, universities and elsewhere.

## 2.2. **Obstacles encountered**

Difficulties encountered by Member States vary and can be classified as follows:

1. *Methodology*: some Member States find it particularly difficult to define a starting point as of which progress should be assessed and to identify indicators for evaluating progress made.
2. *Coordination between actors*: improving coordination between different institutional actors with competencies for youth issues at different levels is a major challenge.
3. *Lack of resources, particularly at local level*.

## 2.3. **Main issues singled out for continued cooperation**

Member States generally call for continued implementation of the adopted common objectives and action lines. The key challenges for the near future would be to establish a coherent national information strategy, better associate national youth councils, focus more on young people with fewer opportunities and disseminate the European youth information charter.

# 3. **PARTICIPATION BY YOUNG PEOPLE IN DEMOCRATIC LIFE**

## 3.1. **Implementation of the common objectives for participation**

Analysis of the reports shows a certain degree of convergence between national youth policies, since actions in favour of youth participation are now undertaken in a more coordinated way.

The implementation of the common objectives on youth participation is mainly achieved by the following means:

### 3.1.1. *Reinforcement of frameworks*

The legal framework in the field of youth participation has been improved. Some Member States have adopted legislation and others have developed strategic action plans or agreed upon new obligations for consulting young people.

**Ireland** has adopted a youth law, the **Czech Republic** a youth concept, **Portugal** a national youth reform program, **Sweden** a government bill – “The power to decide”, **Estonia and Slovenia** a strategic plan, **Latvia** a political programme for youth, **Slovakia** a plan for youth participation, and **Italy** provided special funds to support youth policies.

### 3.1.2. *Support for participative and representative structures*

A number of actions have been implemented with the aim of supporting participative structures and promoting dialogue with partners in the youth field. National youth councils now exist in most Member States, with an appreciable increase in regional and local branches. Other structures such as youth parliaments or specific youth commissions have also been developed. Better interaction between the local, regional, national and European levels is however needed.

In parallel, regular consultations, meetings and hearings have been organised more frequently in the past two years between young people and decision makers. These spaces for dialogue have on some occasions been formalised by partnership contracts.

Some countries have nominated an ombudsman or a correspondent devoted to youth affairs in ministries holding portfolios with youth implications, whilst others have chosen to develop more horizontal practices like inter-ministerial meetings.

National reports show the need for greater efforts at the local level and on removing obstacles affecting participation of certain groups of young people.

Special attention should also be given to consulting young people in a systematic and structured manner on issues that concern them. This is true not only for OMC or European youth pact related issues but applies to any area where young people’s input can make a difference.

Some countries have nominated specific individuals in charge of youth related issues such as, in **Finland**, an ombudsman, in the **UK**, a national youth correspondent and in **Lithuania**, youth coordinators within municipalities.

Others have set-up consultative structures such as youth commissions and local councils in **Luxembourg** and **Belgium**, youth parliaments in **Cyprus** and **Malta**, participative structures for youth in **Greece and Spain**, and more specifically for disadvantaged young people in **Germany** and for rural areas in **Poland**, youth projects supports in **Austria**.

As for young people's participation in representative democracy, their lack of interest has intensified and needs to be addressed urgently. Only a limited number of Member States show they are reflecting upon this situation.

Practices to increase participation of young people in elections can be singled out in:

- **the Netherlands**: parallel vote for youngsters;
- **Finland**: voting in local elections as of 16;
- **France**: automatic registration on electors' list;
- **Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK**: use of internet.

### 3.1.3. *Support for projects*

Common principles underlying public action are that i) young people must be the main actors of their participative projects, ii) the most appreciated way of learning is learning by doing, iii) participative involvement of young people has to be encouraged in all fields where projects are undertaken.

A number of Member States underline the efforts made to open up activities and projects to young people with fewer opportunities. Support for projects and structures, particularly youth organisations, is essential. The YOUTH programme has an important leverage effect in this area.

In **France**, a programme "Envie d'agir" was created to support and reward first projects by and for young people, finance innovative and creative projects as well as voluntary activities and entrepreneurial projects. **Denmark**, in cooperation with various municipalities and youth organisations or clubs, has set-up the project "youth Policy in the Danish Municipalities" to stress the need to better involve young people in policy making.

## 3.2. **Obstacles encountered**

Difficulties encountered by Member States vary and can be classified as follows:

1. *Methodology*: some Member States find it particularly difficult to define a starting point as of which progress should be assessed and to identify indicators for evaluating progress made.
2. *Lack of direct or indirect support*: in addition to the importance of allocating resources to structures and projects, public authorities must recognise the importance of providing stable support, whether through legislative action, development of partnerships with young people or by elaborating common tools such as guidelines for participation.
3. *Lack of involvement of young people themselves*: young people have of course the right not to participate. However, more can be done to encourage youth involvement especially in representative democracy. The influence of peers as experience-sharing "ambassadors" could be explored. Youth participation

could also be boosted by better recognition and promotion of the individual and social benefits of involvement.

4. *Inertia of institutional actors – in youth and other fields:* interaction between the local, regional and national levels needs to be improved. The development of youth participation structures should be further supported and dialogue organised with young people on a broader range of issues. The mobilisation of local authorities is crucial for fostering the local participation of young people.

### **3.3. Main issues singled out for continued cooperation**

Member States support the continued implementation of the adopted common objectives and lines of action. They confirm the importance of further mobilizing local authorities, setting up adequate mechanisms for consulting widely with all young people on a broader range of issues also using information society tools for interactive policy participation e.g. “policy blogging”, developing youth participation in elections as already discussed by Youth Ministers<sup>12</sup>, as well as promoting learning to participate and education in citizenship. Possibilities offered by schools could be better exploited, by developing civic education curricula and making better use of schools’ resources for organising activities that promote “learning to participate by participating”.

## **4. ACTIVE PARTICIPATION BY YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

### **4.1. An improved structured dialogue with young people on the European Agenda**

The need to actively involve young people in policy shaping debates and dialogue is also essential in relation to the European agenda. This has been frequently stressed by the Commission and Member States.

The consultation process for the 2001 White Paper for youth, regular encounters with youth organisations, European youth week, European youth portal consultations, Presidency youth events and other conferences, campaigns, forums, consultations held in Member States are some examples of efforts undertaken by the European Institutions and the Member States to put these principles into practice and better involve young people in the development of the EU.

However, the Commission, notably on the basis of young people’s call for continuous, credible and constructive spaces for dialogue in recent European fora, considers that these existing spaces for dialogue with young people on European issues could be better developed and structured at European, national, regional and local levels.

Advantage should be taken of the impetus given by the above events and recent initiatives such as Plan D, in order to seek to nurture people’s sense of European citizenship by supporting a democratic infrastructure contributing to establishing a “human bridge” and a “Europe of faces”.

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<sup>12</sup> O.J. C 141, 10.6.2005, p.3



#### **4.2. Commission outline of an improved structured dialogue**

To be continuous, credible and constructive, spaces for dialogue should be:

- structured in line with the European youth political agenda up until 2009, i.e. a general theme per Presidency, European Youth Pact priorities addressed during the first presidency of each year and OMC priorities addressed during the second , as well as other horizontal youth priorities;

and

- structured in space and time: i.e. from the local to the European level in order to make a timely and effective contribution to policy developments in the EU, e.g. prior to Presidency youth events, European youth week, reporting within the OMC or the Lisbon Strategy, treaty ratifications and European elections.

Debates involving young people should also be as inclusive and diverse as possible in order to maximise their legitimacy. They must therefore encourage the participation of disadvantaged young people and those who do not belong to any structures. Inclusion and diversity should be basic principles for youth NGOs and representative bodies.

These debates should furthermore bring together actors that deal with youth issues both directly or indirectly in order to enable a more coherent and cross sectoral approach. The role of municipalities and schools in setting up such spaces for dialogue in cooperation with youth organisations (especially youth councils) should be explored.

The “Youth in action” programme 2007 – 2013 could support structures such as youth councils for the purpose of setting up these spaces for debate but also cross border networks of young people and high profile cross border events contributing to the visibility and efficiency of the structured dialogue

#### **5. GOVERNANCE OF THE OMC**

The success of the OMC depends on the effective involvement of young people in its implementation. Young people and their organisations should, for instance, be consulted in the preparation of the national reports. The first reporting exercise shows that this has been done to a varying extent depending on the Member State.

Member States have furthermore highlighted the difficulty of evaluating progress made in the implementation of the common objectives as well as the efficient exchange of good practices.

Finally, sustainable and credible youth policies can only be further developed on the basis of sound knowledge of the youth field. Concomitant implementation of the “greater knowledge and understanding of youth” common objectives thus remains vital.

To respond to these expectations and follow up on the Resolution of 24 May 2005 on the evaluation of activities conducted in the framework of European cooperation in the youth field<sup>13</sup>, the Commission makes certain proposals to reinforce the OMC implementation and evaluation mechanisms (see point 6).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the national reports for participation and information occurs at a key moment for the EU, when young people want to be seen as partners of those who shape the policies that concern them.

On the basis of this analysis the Commission ***proposes to confirm the relevance and validity of the common objectives for participation and information and to slightly adapt and improve the adopted lines of action*** in the following ways:

### **For information:**

*Improve access for young people to information services*

- Establish, notably through a better coordination of information services on their territory, coherent, overarching information strategies, addressing all issues relevant to young people;
- promote information society tools and innovative approaches in youth information, including those aiming at enabling young people with fewer opportunities to access information;

*Quality information*

- further develop individual counselling services;
- use the European youth information charter systematically to ensure good quality information;

*Participation by young people in information*

- enhance participation of young people in public information strategies and reinforce the role of youth organisations in the promotion of youth information.

### **For participation:**

*Participation by young people in civic life*

- ensure structured consultation of young people on issues that are of concern to them, this should particularly entail reinforcing the role of national youth councils in the consultation process, ensuring they also represent the interests of young people who are not members of any organisation;

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<sup>13</sup> O.J. C 141, 10.6.2005, p. 1

- develop local participative structures (e.g. youth councils), with systematic involvement of young people in local decision-making bodies, mobilising the support of regional and local authorities;
- analyse obstacles to participation affecting certain groups of young people, to help youth organisations involve more young people more effectively, thus ensuring their representative nature;
- develop tools to promote participation such as guidelines for participatory mechanisms<sup>14</sup> or interactive policy participation fora on Internet

*Greater participation by young people in the system of representative democracy*

- develop concrete actions to ensure increased participation of young people in the institutions of representative democracy, such as promoting their involvement in political parties, encouraging the inclusion of young people on party lists and improving their position on those lists, facilitating dialogue between young people and political leaders, highlighting the commitment of those participating and encouraging them to act as “ambassadors” amongst their peers, making a better use of information society tools to facilitate voting exercise;

*Support for various forms of learning to participate*

- develop synergies with actions that are undertaken in the education field. At European level this can be achieved through closer links with the education and training OMC. At national level this can be achieved by developing active citizenship initiatives within schools;
- better recognise the different forms of participation by young people.

**Participation in the development of the EU:**

In close cooperation with the Member States and youth organisations, the Commission ***intends to support a permanent and structured dialogue for a period of three years, in a genuine spirit of constructive partnership.*** In this respect the Commission proposes the following concrete lines of action:

*At national, regional and local level*

- Set up structured spaces for dialogue and debate, timed in accordance with the European political agenda, starting chronologically from the local level to ensure timely and effective input from young people to EU debates;

*At European level*

- Agree upon priority themes to be discussed at EU level until 2009 i.e. social inclusion and diversity in 2007, intercultural dialogue in 2008 and perspectives for continued cooperation in the youth field in 2009. These themes should be discussed together with priorities tackled under the OMC and the European Youth

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<sup>14</sup> Based on the Council of Europe’s Participation Charter.

Pact - following current practice - as well as with horizontal priorities agreed upon in the youth field such as antidiscrimination and health;

- The Commission supports the idea of an informal forum between youth representatives, presidencies, the European Parliament and the Commission that would meet regularly – in particular before Education, Youth and Culture Councils in the autumn and spring in Brussels - in order to improve coherence, continuity and progress between Presidency agendas in the youth field;
- Regularly organise a European Youth week with the participation of Commissioners and representatives of other European institutions, preceded by a European youth portal consultation whenever possible, with a view to drawing conclusions on past events, identifying perspectives for the future and ensuring the visibility of the European youth programme;
- Arrange encounters with young people who do not usually have contacts with the European institutions;
- Organise a youth specific Eurobarometre (end 2006);
- Invite the European Youth Forum to make the best use of opportunities offered by public consultations regularly launched by the Commission, notably through the internet, on policies relevant for young people;
- Mobilise European information networks to support structured dialogue<sup>15</sup>.

***The Youth OMC governance, while remaining adapted to the youth field, should also be reinforced.*** To this end the Commission makes the following proposals:

- Member States single out by the end of 2006 those lines of action for participation and information on which they wish to concentrate and define action plans;
- Member States set up a follow up mechanism involving young people and their organisations and prepare an evaluation report by the end of 2008;
- Member States be given the opportunity to take part, on a voluntary basis, in pilot “peer reviews” organised by the Commission, on information and participation;
- Member States promote the common objectives at national level amongst regional and local authorities, youth organisations and young people in general;
- the Commission will systematically consult young people and more particularly the European Youth Forum for any proposal relating to the OMC;
- It will set up a working group on the definition of indicators for the implementation of the common objectives on participation and information.

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The Commission calls on the Council to endorse the proposals made in its Communication.

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<sup>15</sup> ERYICA, EURODESK and EYCA