

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

(2002/C 287/02)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the European Commission White Paper: A New Impetus for European Youth (COM(2001) 681 final);

having regard to the European Commission Decision of 22 November 2001 to consult it under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to the Decision taken by its Bureau on 6 February 2002 to instruct Commission — Culture and Education — to draw up an Opinion on this subject;

having regard to Article 149 of the EC Treaty;

having regard to Decision No 1031/2000/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 April 2000 establishing the 'Youth' Community Action Programme;

having regard to the Council Resolution of 8 February 1999 on youth participation;

having regard to the European Parliament Resolution of 9 March 1999 on a youth policy for Europe;

having regard to the Council Resolution of 14 December 2000 on the social inclusion of young people;

having regard to the Council Resolution of 28 June 2001 on promoting young people's initiative, enterprise and creativity: from exclusion to empowerment;

having regard to the Council Resolution of 29 November 2001 on the added value of voluntary work for young people in the context of the development of Community action on youth;

having regard to the Council Resolution approved on 30 May 2002 on European Cooperation in the Field of Youth;

having regard to the CoR Opinion on the Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci and Youth Programmes (CdR 226/98 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

having regard to the CoR Opinion on the European voluntary service for young people — action programme (CdR 191/96 fin) ⁽²⁾;

having regard to the CoR Opinion on the Daphne Programme (CdR 300/98 fin) ⁽³⁾;

having regard to the CoR Opinion on Local and regional cooperation to protect children and young people from abuse and neglect in the European Union (CdR 225/1999 fin) ⁽⁴⁾;

having regard to the Draft Opinion (CdR 389/2001 rev. 2) adopted by Commission — Culture and Education — on 23 May 2002 (rapporteurs: Mr Yannick Bodin, (F-PES) Vice-President of the Île-de-France Regional Council; Mr Lars Nordstrom, (S-ELDR) Regional Councillor, Västra Götalandsregion;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 51, 22.2.1999, p. 77.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 42, 10.2.1997, p. 1.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 198, 14.7.1999, p. 61.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 57, 29.2.2000, p. 46.

whereas young people and the up-and-coming generation are of key importance to regional and local bodies;

whereas regional and local authorities play a major role in European youth policy since they are the first to come into contact with young people and their needs and it is at this level that young people gain their first experiences of organisational and political activity;

whereas the Commission has no competence for youth policy but, under EC Treaty Article 149, has a certain responsibility for promoting exchanges between young people and youth leaders;

whereas new measures are needed to take greater heed of young people's aspirations regarding European cooperation and to enable them to play a fully committed role at local, regional and national level;

whereas the open method of cooperation can contribute to a more dynamic youth policy which respects national, regional and local remits while creating new forms of European cooperation;

whereas it is important for youth aspects to be integrated into other areas of policy since the EU can assist indirectly in giving young people a good start in life and improving their chances of general well-being and personal capacity to succeed in life,

adopted the following opinion at its 45th plenary session on 3 and 4 July 2002 (meeting of 3 July).

The Committee of the Regions' views and recommendations

1.1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's initiative in publishing the White Paper on 'A new impetus for European Youth'⁽¹⁾ and the extensive public consultation which preceded its presentation to the Council on 29 November 2001. This consultation is a good example of the way in which a wide range of ordinary people and recognised experts can be involved in the Commission's work and is completely in the spirit of the recommendations made in the White Paper on European Governance.

1.2. The Committee of the Regions shares the Commission's outlook on the challenges and problems facing European youth today and believes that new actions are needed to address more effectively the wishes of young people, particularly with respect to European cooperation, and to enable them to become fully involved at local, regional and national level. The White Paper on 'A new impetus for European Youth' concerns young people from 15-25 years. For decentralised authorities, however, a link should be established with policies targeting a younger age group (from 6-15 years) with a view to coordination with future preventive measures.

1.3. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Council's support to the future work in the field of youth and in

particular the focus given to promoting youth participation at local and regional level as expressed in the Council resolution on European Cooperation in the Field of Youth approved on 30 May 2002 and the conclusions of the meeting thereof.

The open method of coordination

1.4. The Committee of the Regions feels that it is not enough for the Commission to note that 'the population of the EU is ageing'. It is also important for the Member States' governments to encourage positive demographic patterns through pursuing a dynamic pro-family policy. In particular, regional and local authorities must earmark resources for families with children and young people in different age groups and from different ethnic backgrounds.

1.5. EU youth initiatives have in the past been restricted by necessity to specific exchange programmes and contacts owing to the lack of a common policy for young people and of a legal basis for drawing up a Community policy for secondary and university education. The CoR shares the Commission's view that these programmes should be developed further and even more important, backed up by new measures, so that young Europeans can participate fully in cooperation in Europe.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2001) 681 final.

1.6. The CoR welcomes the Commission's proposal to apply the open method of coordination in relation to young people and also to take greater account of them in other policies. In particular the involvement of young people in the open method of coordination should not be restricted to consultation on the 'priority themes' but should involve all stages of the process. The Committee would point out, however, that no grounds for new European competences may be derived from any agreement between the Member States on guidelines and/or objectives — including the regular monitoring and evaluation thereof.

1.7. The CoR asks that the involvement of local and regional authorities in the open method of coordination be clearly recognised and respected. This new method must not in any way be used at the expense of local and regional authorities, but rather in close and active consultation with them. The principles of subsidiarity, proximity and proportionality should be respected in all new EU youth initiatives.

1.8. The CoR therefore asks to be consulted and not just informed on the common objectives that will be drafted for each of the four thematic priorities (participation, information, voluntary activities among young people and greater understanding and knowledge of youth) and presented to the Council. Furthermore the CoR calls on the Member States to consult local and regional authorities when preparing the questionnaires that will be the basis of the common objectives.

Young people's aspirations

1.9. The CoR would point out that young people must be considered as a heterogeneous social group, as their circumstances differ widely, regardless of their age group.

1.10. The Committee of the Regions believes that it should be made clear that Europe's young people do not speak with one voice, but that they are diverse. European youth policies must leave room for a wide range of viewpoints. It is therefore good that young people who do not belong to organised clubs or associations are also able to take part in the consultation exercises which the Commission is planning. The CoR considers that the European Youth Forum already meets the requirements of representativeness, diversity and transparency.

1.11. Whilst aware of the difficulties involved, the Committee of the Regions regrets that the consultation did not include disadvantaged young people from problem areas or more of their representatives.

1.12. The CoR recognizes that certain problems, needs and aspirations are typical of young people, as they make the transition from family to working life. Many of them want more independence, not only financially but also as regards access to certain rights such as housing, information, training, stable employment, healthcare and transport. Developing the autonomy of young people must be broadened beyond economic criteria to include their ability to make decisions in a wide range of areas. The CoR considers that promoting autonomy should be about empowering young people;

1.13. The Committee of the Regions shares the Commission's view of the need to factor young people's aspirations into national and EU public policy and notes with interest the Commission's express intention to improve understanding at European level of youth as a subject to be studied by networking existing structures and research.

Helping the most disadvantaged young people

1.14. The CoR believes that the specific needs and aspirations of young women must be taken into account. Young women are all too often victims of physical, verbal and a variety of other forms of abuse, and discriminated against both at school and in the workplace. The Committee of the Regions asks that European youth policies place a particular, practical emphasis on the situation of young women with a view to reinforcing specific programmes.

1.15. Similarly, the CoR stresses the need for action to assist categories of young people with specific needs. This is the case for the various immigrant groups (especially young women) who often have to deal with difficult personal situations and therefore must be able to benefit from special measures.

1.16. The same applies to disabled young people whose special needs must be accommodated in European strategies on social integration.

1.17. Lastly, the situation in the applicant countries requires specific attention and measures. Young people from these countries should be able to participate in European cooperation and the debate on the future of Europe at an early stage, in order to foster their integration.

Encouraging citizenship

1.18. The CoR notes with concern that diminishing numbers of young people are taking part in traditional political and social activities. The CoR considers that, in particular, the influence and place of young people in public life should be bolstered to restore their confidence in traditional political activity. The pilot projects proposed in the White Paper to promote participation at local, regional and national level offer a useful forum in which to develop new initiatives. At the same time, national, regional and local competences should be strictly respected when youth policy is mapped out and formulated.

1.19. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's recognition of the key importance of the regional and local dimension in youth policy. It is at local and regional level that government is in direct contact with young people and their needs, and where successful initiatives have already been implemented. Best practices should be studied and disseminated at European level to encourage exchange of experiences and effective cooperation in public policies on youth. Local and regional authorities have therefore a central role to play both in devising and applying European youth policies.

1.20. The CoR considers that the EU, the Member States and local and regional authorities should do still more to encourage young people to be active citizens, particularly by creating the conditions in which clubs and associations can flourish and by ensuring that young people have access to and participate in political life. The CoR awaits the work and contributions of the Youth Convention on the Future of the Union with keen interest.

1.21. The CoR shares the Commission's view that it is locally, at grass-roots level, that young people acquire active citizenship. The Youth programme's pilot projects should be made operational rapidly so as to develop participation at local and regional level and disseminate best practice on active citizenship for young people.

1.22. The CoR shares the Commission's positive outlook that, in addition to strengthening representative democracy, it is also important to develop participatory democracy in order to create an open, integrated society in which all may participate. Tomorrow's Europe must be an open society: tolerant and in touch with everybody's concerns. The purpose of promoting participatory democracy is to reduce the distance between citizens and the institutions of the Union.

1.23. Mindful that democracy has a price, the CoR considers that all public authorities should step up their support for youth movements, particularly on issues such as respect for democratic institutions, systems and values. All forms of racism, anti-semitism and xenophobia must be tackled. The CoR welcomes the proposal included in the Youth programme to set up an Internet platform designed for young people, and if possible run by young people, to combat these evils. The rise in extremism in an increasing number of Member States of the Union makes it all the more imperative to promote democratic values and tolerance, which are the basis for European cooperation and which are a prerequisite for all European public policy in relation to youth.

Lifelong learning and employment

1.24. The CoR shares the Commission's positive opinion of lifelong learning. Its principles should also be included in school curricula. It requires more precise quality standards and an assessment of skills acquired so that all the benefits of non-formal educational methods can be fully recognised and used in the interests of young people seeking employment or wishing to improve their occupational status.

1.25. The Committee also notes that in order to increase European awareness, basic and higher education curricula need to include specific references to the founding and development of the European Union.

1.26. The CoR encourages local and regional authorities to take immediate steps to recognise experience gained by young people in voluntary work and the European voluntary service programme.

1.27. The CoR would stress the decisive role of employment in any active youth policy. The specific needs of young people must be given clear consideration when national action plans for employment are drawn up. The CoR also considers that action could be taken within the Member States to ensure that discrimination against young people in minimum wages legislation is addressed where such legislation exists.

The Youth programme

1.28. The CoR notes with interest that the European voluntary service programme is still an important instrument for European cooperation and the exchange of experience. It is essential that information about the Youth programme also reach young people who are not involved in conventional European youth cooperation. It is also important to ensure

that local and regional players are also able to derive full benefit from this programme.

1.29. The CoR notes with interest that the European voluntary service programme is to become permanent. The Commission and the national governments must ensure that the free movement of young people participating in the programme is not restricted and that flexible systems are set up for the social and legal status of occasional unpaid voluntary work in Europe.

1.30. The local and regional players must, of course, be represented in the dialogue planned with young Europeans. The future of European integration depends on the involvement and commitment by young people to the European project and the values which underpin it. The consultation should therefore be organised around the five principles underpinning the White Paper on European Governance: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence.

Brussels, 3 July 2002.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Albert BORE
