

# YOUTH POLICY ESSENTIALS



Revision 2019

## Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



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## Introduction

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**H**ow can policies enable young people to be active citizens? How can they support young people to be included in society and to realise their aspirations and potential? This overview of the main concepts, principles, and challenges of youth policy is meant to help answer these questions.

A word of caution: youth policy is complex. We invite the reader to consider their own context, which may be more complex and even more complicated! Much more has been written, discussed and debated on youth policy than is included in this document, so if your journey brought you here, we hope it will not stop here! We invite you to continue using the references included in these “essentials” and the website of the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth.



## Definitions: what is youth policy? What is it for?

**D**efinitions and realities of youth policy vary across countries, within countries, and also over time. Let's start with a few basic elements.

**”** *Youth policy is a strategy implemented by public authorities with a view to providing young people with opportunities and experiences that support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of their societies, as well as agents of change.*  
(Council of Europe CM/Rec(2015)3)

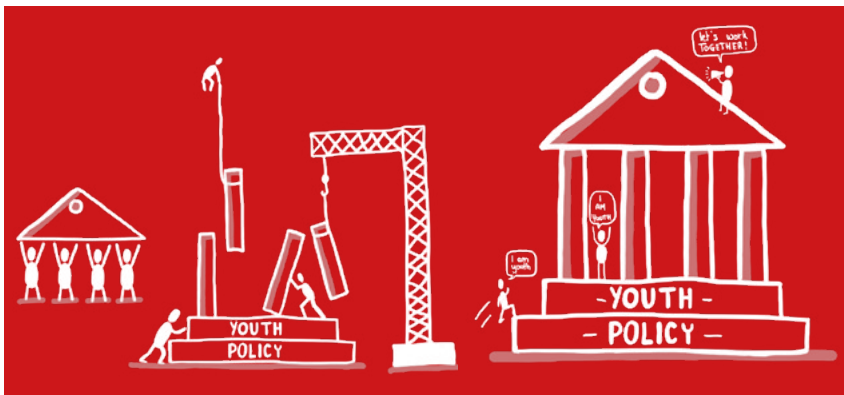
■ What can a youth policy do for young people? In general, youth policy addresses various and interlinked dimensions in young people's lives: wellbeing, learning, democratic participation, and inclusion. Youth policy can offer opportunities for young people to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes to find their place in society, to be autonomous, to play a role in civil society and the labour market. On their end, young people may experience youth policy provisions as meaningful leisure time activities associated with positive values (solidarity, group cohesion etc.), or as health promotion activities, programmes for entrepreneurship or access to youth friendly justice, etc. In one way or another, youth policy can create opportunities for young people to find a “home” within a community of values. By doing this, it can support social cohesion and the development of democratic societies.

■ “Youth policy” may be seen as encompassing all policy domains affecting young people, e.g. social protection, health, housing, employment/entrepreneurship, formal education, and so on, as well as transversal issues such as social inclusion, youth participation, gender equality etc.

■ Youth policy may also be understood as addressing specifically young people, e.g. through programmes for leisure time activities, mobility, volunteering, youth work programmes, youth information, and platforms for youth participation and involvement in decision-making. In this case, youth policy possibly coordinates with the other policy domains relevant to young people.

■ That is a positive vision of youth policy. But it happens to be also about regulation, surveillance, coercion, discipline and sometimes punishment. An enforced activity in return for income when a young person is unemployed or youth justice measures in custody are examples of negative youth policy.

■ Youth policy may include measures or programmes for all young people as it may include measures for specific groups of young people, such as those economically vulnerable or living in rural areas.





## Basic concepts

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**T**he first word in “youth policy” is youth, and understanding what is meant by “youth” in different contexts will also shape what a youth policy may contain.

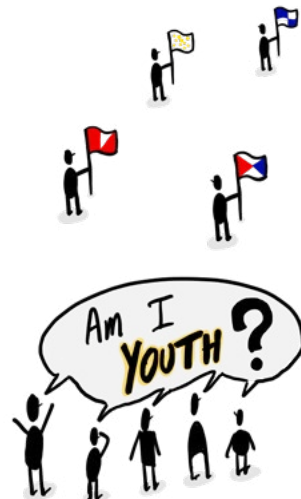
There is no universal consensus on what “youth” is. Youth is socially constructed and refers to the period of complex transitions to autonomy, from childhood to adulthood. Definitions of young people vary between countries. The age range 15-29 is often selected for statistical purposes at EU level. Under the Erasmus+ programme, various opportunities are available for young people aged 13 to 30. The Council of Europe youth sector’s activities are available for young people aged 18 to 30, with justified exceptions.

■ The second word in “youth policy” is policy, which is a process by which public resources are allocated to achieve political objectives. When speaking about youth policy, one needs to pay attention to what is actually meant: the process of *making* youth policy, its *focus* or the policy domains covered, or its *application*, how it is delivered for young people (Williamson 2017).



What definition of “youth” is being used in your country?  
Does everyone agree with this definition?

What is the main perception of youth in the country?  
Which five words are used to describe youth?





## Approaches

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**Y**outh policy reflects how a government or decision-makers view young people. The value framework of a youth policy is very important to consider, as it has implications at all levels, from the first steps of the process of developing it, to the measures or programmes reaching young people and the goals they reach them for. In some cases, these values and principles may guide youth policy, but in others they may be absent. In a democratic society, the principles of youth policy may include social progress, solidarity, social justice, active citizenship, social and economic integration.

Policy-making approaches and methodologies range from regulation to emancipation, from prevention to intervention, from proactive to reactive, from problem oriented to opportunity focused, from paternalistic to open. Applying one approach or another translates into very diverse measures, the rationale and implications of which have to be carefully considered. For example, there is a difference between funds for projects that fit a prescribed model and funds for youth-led creativity projects.



■ Youth policies may be integrated or fragmented, coordinated or isolated, target group specific or mainstream, in harmony or in conflict with other policies. In some countries, youth policy is a part of the state development agenda, in others its aims are based on reactive responses to emerging problems. It may be based on theoretical frameworks of youth development or disregard them, correspond or not to wider European goals, be restricted or expanded by fluctuations of the economy, have a solid knowledge base or refer more to anecdotal evidence. Across Europe, countries with similar socio-political regimes tend to have broadly similar approaches to youth policy development and implementation, at least in terms of the range of domains they cover and the priorities they adopt.

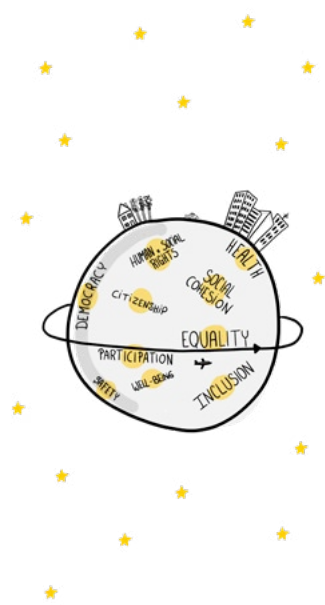
■ The Council of Europe promotes youth policies that are based on human rights and democratic standards, opportunity-focused, involve young people in their formulation and implementation, create conditions for learning, opportunity and experience, and are based on robust data collection. The European Union, through its youth strategy, supports policies that create more opportunities for young people, improving their access and full participation in society. Such policy frameworks also value the role of youth work and non-formal learning, stress the importance of a cross-sectoral approach, and emphasise the need for evidence and dialogue with young people.



How are young people viewed by decision-makers in your context? Are they viewed as a resource, as “the future”, as a problem to fix or to control?

Which values are youth policies based on in your context? What are the aims and key areas of youth policy in your country?

Do the challenges that young people face and youth policy aims match?





## Youth policy actors and legal basis

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**D**ifferent types of authorities may work on youth policy matters, across levels and sectors, and in different roles. In some countries, youth policy is a competence of the national government. In others it is a competence of regional authorities, with the national government framing broader goals and ensuring coherence. Local authorities deliver youth policy at their level. The structures responsible for youth policy at the national level may include a ministry responsible for youth (alone or together with sectors such as culture, education, sport, family and children, social affairs, media, justice, public health, or communities), a state agency, a state secretary for youth, a youth department or youth policy division. Authorities at local and regional level may include youth offices/officers, spokespersons, youth committees, again with a specific remit or in partnership with other sectors.

■ While public authorities are critical youth policy makers, there are many other actors that may be involved in informing, developing and implementing youth policy: youth councils, youth NGOs, interest groups, youth groups, youth workers, youth researchers, young people, schools, teachers, employers, medical staff, social workers, faith groups, the media, and more.



Legal frameworks express who should be involved in youth policy processes. In some contexts, youth policies may be defined in a single legal act. In others, elements of youth policy may be included in documents concerning several sectors, interlinked within one legal framework (law, pact, resolution, strategies, action plan, state concept, etc.). The latter is often described as youth mainstreaming. However, if those documents and related initiatives are not deliberately and explicitly linked to young people, it is hard to talk of a coordinated youth policy, even though such policies still have an impact on young people.



What legal basis governs youth policy in your country?

Which youth policy structures exist in your country?





## Youth participation

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In general, it is important for those who are targeted by a policy to have a say in all matters that concern them. Young people should have the right, means, support, opportunities and space to participate as partners in youth policy: advising or co-deciding on its design, contributing to service delivery, monitoring and evaluating impact of the policies and not merely as beneficiaries of services. If young people are involved, they feel ownership of the decisions made, and the services created can correspond better to their aspirations or rights. The chances for success for those policies are then higher!

However, not all young people participate in the same ways. To ensure that youth policy making is as inclusive as possible public authorities must develop tailored, diversified, and user-friendly mechanisms for participation through, for example, dialogue with youth councils and youth organisations, consultations with young people and diverse relevant actors, digital participation etc. Two more examples:

- ▶ the system of co-management of the Council of Europe youth sector, where representatives of governments and of youth organisations take the decisions regarding the Council of Europe's work programme on youth together,
- ▶ the Youth Dialogue with young people in the EU, where the views of young people are collected, jointly discussed and considered in policy making at national and EU levels.

■ The question of the (power) relations between public authorities and civil society, particularly youth organisations and young people themselves, is an important one. For example, the government may act as a partner to civil society and share power, or it may control what youth organisations do, or it may not intervene or help their work at all (adapted from Lauritzen 2008).



Who makes sure that all the relevant actors have a say and influence on policy development and implementation?

Are youth NGOs involved in youth policy? How?

Are young people involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of youth policy? All young people? How?

Is there a national youth council or another type of structure to represent youth organisations?



## Making youth policy happen

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**E**ach country has its own mechanisms for youth policy implementation. Generally, the central government has a role in the formulation of the policy framework, when it creates (for example, through legislation and budgets) the conditions for regional and local level action, and finally it generally follows up and evaluates the implementation of policy objectives. When developing youth policy objectives, the authorities consider the outcomes of earlier policy processes and outcomes, as well as relevant research data. The central government may establish general objectives and sometimes require local or regional authorities to develop specific ones. The second step concerns the provision of structures and resources, and this may consist of having specific legislation to define services or funding arrangements. This creates the conditions for activities, interventions and services to be put in place. Finally, the state assesses the results from the regional and local levels. Youth policy action may and should be complemented by gathering empirical data on how policy aspirations are implemented in practice, who they have reached, with what effect, in order to know what to change when needed. For this cycle to function effectively, the formulation of objectives should come together with benchmarks for their evaluation: objectives should be unambiguous, ideologically explicit, measurable and relative to the resources available (Siurala 2006). Other youth policy actors, as well as government, should be involved throughout the process.

■ We speak of youth policy having a cross-sectoral dimension when there is a process of co-operation between the youth sector and other sectors in matters relevant to young people. For cross-sectoral co-ordination, we may find within a ministry responsible for youth a cross- or inter-ministerial committee. Alternatively, there could be a political representative for youth affairs with a co-ordinating responsibility. While appropriate and needed in theory, working in partnership across different policy sectors (hence, across ministries and agencies) is a demanding process in practice.



What are the relations between different levels of youth policy in your country?

How does the state support the delivery at local level? How to ensure the consistency of the services available for young people across different regions or municipalities?

Is there any cross-sectoral body that monitors the development of youth policy in your country?

Do youth workers or other professionals working with young people know the youth policy frameworks at the national level?



## Keys to success

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**W**hat does one need to think about when planning, implementing and evaluating youth policy?

■ Key aspects of effective and purposeful youth policy include:

- ▶ a clearly defined government authority on youth, a body that can lead, direct, coordinate and consolidate the work.
- ▶ a clearly defined intended beneficiary group of young people, for example a definition of age limits and/or of the groups that the policy intervention aims to reach.
- ▶ a concrete and transparent strategy and an action plan, and mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation, to keep policy makers accountable and to learn in order to improve youth policy.
- ▶ a knowledge base, for example a mapping of the different needs of different young people, research and statistics, and empirical information from policy implementation.
- ▶ a vision considering young people as a resource, not as a problem, to support and empower young people to develop their full potential and to contribute positively to society.
- ▶ a belief in the value of and a capacity to enable meaningful youth participation, i.e. young people participating in policy processes and being engaged in youth organisations and community life.



- ▶ a cross-sectoral approach to youth policy, bringing together different sectors of public policies that have a role to play in the lives of young people, from the “youth field” and beyond.
- ▶ a separate sustainable budget, because policy needs to be backed by sustainable, dedicated, adequate resources for implementation.
- ▶ established links between local, regional and national levels, recognising the competences and responsibilities of all actors and seeking co-operation, co-ordination and partnership.
- ▶ consistency with international practice, taking into account standards, recommendations and good practices.

*(adapted from Denstad 2009)*

■ When we look at youth policy, we can analyse how it is organised, who does what, how much it costs, but first and foremost - whether youth policy reaches the right young people in a meaningful and relevant way. A core challenge for youth policy is to maximize the reach of positive youth policy and to minimize the reach of negative youth policy.



Who is the main target of the youth policy in your context (a specific group, specific life situation, all youth, etc.)?

What kind of evidence supports the objectives of youth policy in your context?

Why might some of the youth policies you know of have been established? What do they seek to achieve and whom do they seek to reach?

Is there a dedicated budget for youth? What is it mainly used for?

Are there any good practices of youth policy in your context?



## From youth policy to service delivery and practice

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**H**ow do youth policies reach young people? Many different programmes or interventions can be initiated within a youth policy, on very varied topics, ranging across participation and citizenship, safety and protection, combating social exclusion, information and new technologies, mobility and internationalism, living together in multicultural societies, career orientation, leisure time, promoting equality and non-discrimination, environmental issues, and so on. Programmes may include funding for youth projects, non-formal education programmes, information and counselling, schemes for supporting access to the labour market, the provision of youth work and much more.

■ One of the key tools of youth policy is youth work, understood as a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by paid and volunteer youth workers and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation. The main objective is to motivate and support young people to find and pursue constructive pathways in life, thus contributing to their personal and social development and to society at large (Council of Europe 2017).

■ An important question concerning those who work with young people within frameworks of youth policy is the competences of those involved, and ways of acquiring them. For example, the training of youth workers is an important consideration to make sure that the services that reach young people are of high quality and in line with youth policy objectives. Another question is the one of capacity, whether or not the infrastructure in place provides sufficiently safe and appropriate spaces for learning and meaningful activities for young people.



How is the youth policy delivery organised in your country?

What tools does youth policy use to reach young people?  
What are the tools for delivery?

How are youth policy professionals and those working with young people trained?





# Youth policy on European and national level

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In Europe youth policies at national level are formulated according to the country priorities and realities but often they are also inspired and shaped by the themes and priorities of the European Union and the Council of Europe, which have their own particular missions and mandates.

## European Union

— The EU youth strategy (2019-2027) focuses on three areas: *engage*, *connect* and *empower*. The strategy fosters youth participation in democratic life (*engage*); it promotes voluntary engagement, learning mobility, solidarity and intercultural learning (*connect*) and supports youth empowerment through quality, innovation and recognition of youth work (*empower*). The strategy intends to reach out to all young people and make EU programmes more inclusive for those with fewer opportunities. The Strategy takes into account the results of dialogue with young people which led to the identification of 11 European Youth Goals.

— These objectives are achieved through specific youth programmes, such as Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Corps. The strategy is based on effective, focused and joined-up implementation across sectors, by mobilizing several EU programmes and funds and encouraging cross-sectoral co-operation at all levels. The EU Youth Strategy includes mutual learning activities among member states, sharing of information from the national level, the EU Youth Dialogue and other forms of participation of young people in policy-making, the EU Youth Strategy Platform and evidence-base tools. The EU Youth Coordinator is the European Commission's contact and visible reference point for young people.



## Council of Europe

■ The youth policy of the Council of Europe is currently defined in the strategic document “Agenda 2020”, which sets the priorities for European youth policy until 2020: human rights and democracy; living together in diverse societies; and the social inclusion of young people. The Council of Europe promotes youth policies based on human rights and democratic standards, focusing on participation, information, inclusion, access to rights, youth work and mobility, that connect young people to the construction of Europe as a community based on human rights and democracy.

■ The Council of Europe facilitates intergovernmental and international cooperation in relation to the development of youth policy and offers member states support measures for youth policy development based on internationally recognised principles and standards. These measures include seminars and capacity building through non-formal educational activities, international reviews of national youth policies, secondments, peer-learning, independent expertise or assessment, study visits and advisory missions. Other measures include funding for youth projects through the European Youth Foundation and capacity building programmes at the European Youth Centres.

## EU-CoE youth partnership

■ The European Commission and the Council of Europe work together through their partnership in the youth field, to foster synergies between their youth-oriented activities. For example, the EU-CoE youth partnership collects and elaborates knowledge for the development of youth policy and youth work, in particular around the themes of youth participation, social inclusion and youth work.



How is youth policy at European level connected to youth policy at national level in your country?

How are connections made between European, national and local levels of youth policy?



## Challenges

**T**here are many challenges related to youth policy. Some are related to the contemporary realities youth policy is supposed to address (e.g. youth unemployment, violent extremism). Others are recurrent within the youth policy debate, such as:

- ▶ Public authorities do not really commit to youth policy. Actions and programmes are scattered across different policy domains. There may be “something” related to youth, but no coherent goals.
- ▶ Youth policy is developed on the basis of political ideologies or current interests, at times becoming a tool for maintaining political power, not taking into account the situation, needs or rights of young people.
- ▶ The mechanisms and resources to implement youth strategies are missing.
- ▶ When youth policy is defined and implemented, different agencies or public authorities do not work together, even if they target young people in relation to problems linked with several policy domains.
- ▶ Young people are not involved in shaping youth policies. If and when young people are involved, the policy agenda is already set and their input is not taken into account or young people who participate are not considered representative.
- ▶ Public authorities in charge of youth policy are insufficiently prepared to work with young people.
- ▶ There is no independent monitoring and/or evaluation of what a youth policy has achieved and where it has failed, or what other needs it should address. Programmes are replicated without learning from what was done.



What main challenges for youth policy do you see in your country/region?

What main questions should those responsible for youth policy prioritise in your country/region?

- ▶ When a youth policy foresees funding schemes for (youth) organisations or other civil society entities, they are not open to all organisations, regardless of what they propose.
- ▶ Professionals working with/for young people, such as youth workers, youth counselling and information officers, or educators are insufficiently trained.
- ▶ The outreach of youth policy is problematic. Programmes do not reach those they are designed for, or the target group definition is too narrow and there is little for young people in general.

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Dedicated website to the European Youth Goals, with version in various European languages <http://www.youthgoals.eu/>



Understanding some of the essentials of youth policy is an important step in looking at how youth policy can tackle challenges young people face today.

*How can policies enable young people to be active citizens? How can they support young people to be included in society and to realise their aspirations and potential? These are all important questions in a context in which young people experience complex life transitions to adulthood and are also the protagonists of social change.*

*Public authorities have a very important role in devising strategies and policies with a view to providing young people with opportunities and experiences that support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of their societies, as well as agents of change.*

This document offers all those interested in youth policy an overview of its main concepts, principles, approaches, and challenges.

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