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Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the EU

Final Report
Executive Summary

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Directorate-General for Education and Culture

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Strategy and the Council
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Executive Summary

The evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU was conducted by ICF International, in partnership with Technopolis, from March 2015 to February 2016. It involved consultations with young people, youth and volunteering organisations, Ministries in charge of Youth, National Youth Councils, National Agencies for Erasmus+ and other EU and national-level stakeholders who participated in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy over the 2010-2014/5 period. The evaluation team also interviewed members of the European Commission involved in youth issues (DG EAC, DG EMPL, DG RTD, DG REGIO and DG SANTE) as well as representatives of the Council of Europe and of the European Youth Forum.

Context and background

The EU Youth Strategy is the framework for European cooperation in the youth field for 2010-2018. Its legal basis lies in the Council Resolution adopted in November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field. The Strategy is set to improve the situation of young people in Europe by creating more and equal opportunities for them in education and the labour market and by promoting their active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity. To achieve this, the Strategy seeks to develop a transversal approach to youth issues. Building on the first framework of Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the youth field that was rooted in the EU White Paper on Youth, the EU Youth Strategy goes beyond youth-specific initiatives by adding a mainstreaming dimension in view of linking EU youth policy to the EU strategies for education, employment and social inclusion.

Under the renewed framework, EU Member States (EUMS) have been invited to cooperate on youth-related issues by setting common objectives and possible initiatives in eight fields of action, covering both core areas of youth policy (participation, voluntary activities, culture and creativity, youth and the world) as well as areas addressing young people's socio-economic issues (education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, health and well-being, social inclusion). Since volunteering is one of the areas covered by the Strategy, the implementation of the Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU, adopted in 2008 as the first-ever Council Recommendation in the youth field, was included under the EU Youth Strategy as one of the key initiatives for achieving progress in this area.

The present evaluation is the first external evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy since it was launched in 2010. The evaluation covers the period 2010-2014/5¹ and thus concerns a mid-term evaluation of the Strategy, which is designed to cover the period until 2018. Until this external evaluation, the monitoring of progress in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy was undertaken internally, through reporting from Member States and key stakeholders resulting in the Joint EU Youth Reports in 2012 and 2015.

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was twofold:

- To evaluate the EU Youth Strategy and, within it, the Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU, in order to provide an assessment of its relevance, coherence, effectiveness, EU added value, efficiency and sustainability; and

¹ Whilst the evaluation period mentioned in the ToRs ended in 2014 (at interim stage of the 2010-2018 OMC), it was not always easy and logical to exclude the 2015 activities. Considering that data collection was conducted in 2015, and that interviewees and survey respondents were reacting to the most recent developments, evidence for 2015 has also been included in this report.

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- To identify ways of improving the implementation and governance of the EU Youth cooperation framework for the period 2015-2018 and also inform the renewal of the Youth Strategy in the post 2018 period.

In addition to the evaluation, the team also proposed a dissemination plan to help the Commission communicate the results of the evaluation to relevant stakeholders, practitioners and the general public.

Method of approach

The data-collection, analysis and reporting were structured around four main phases: (1) inception; (2) EU-28 data-collection; (3) case studies; and (4) analysis and reporting. Mixed methods of data collection were used:

- **Mapping** of activities conducted at national and EU level linked to the Strategy and/or Council Recommendation as well as mapping of the outputs and outcomes produced;
- Two **online surveys**: (i) of young Europeans aged 15-30, with 719 respondents; and (ii) of youth organisations, with 250 organisations which responded;
- **Interviews** with 126 national stakeholders in 28 EU countries (Ministries in charge of Youth, other relevant Ministries, Erasmus+ National Agencies, National Youth Councils and volunteering organisations) and with 25 EU-level stakeholders (from the European Commission, Council of Europe, European Youth Information and Counselling Agency, European Youth Card Association, European Youth Forum and other European federations of youth organisations);
- Ten **case studies** involving 36 stakeholder interviews and covering eight countries with different approaches to youth policy and volunteering, and two EU-level initiatives linked to the EU Youth Strategy / Council Recommendation.

Some challenges to data collection were encountered (e.g. quality and quantity of data from National Youth Reports, availability of interviewees and their variable level of knowledge of the EU Youth Strategy, difficulty of quantifying the outcomes of an OMC, unavailability of data on costs of other OMCs etc.), nevertheless these have not resulted in major obstacles to the quality of the evaluation. Although the geographical distribution of survey respondents varies across the EU countries, this did not create a major bias in responses.

Overall evaluation findings and recommendations

During its first five years, the EU Youth Strategy was implemented in a rather negative economic context. The situation of young people deteriorated in terms of unemployment, social exclusion and risk of poverty in the aftermath of the economic crisis in Europe. This meant that initiatives to ease youth unemployment and to improve education and training moved up the policy agenda in most Member States and at EU level. Youth unemployment and social exclusion became an issue of great urgency for the EU cooperation in the youth field. Furthermore, in parallel to the EU Youth Strategy, attention to youth employment and social inclusion was included in various EU strategic policies. Member States discussed youth unemployment at the highest level in the EU and reached common positions on key youth-related initiatives at EU level, such as the Youth Guarantee. This meant that while the youth agenda gained stronger importance, it became rather focused on the topics of employability while lesser attention was being paid to core youth policy issues, such as civic participation or volunteering. The below presents the evaluation's key findings, per evaluation criteria, and the related recommendations.

Relevance and coherence

Over the period 2010-2014, the EU Youth Strategy has overall been relevant to the needs and problems of young Europeans as well as to the activities of youth policy-

makers in all EUMS. Over 80% of the surveyed youth organisations considered that all of the EU activities they participated in, within the framework of the EU Youth Strategy, had been relevant to their work. Similarly, two-thirds of the policy-makers interviewed at national level considered the objectives and areas covered by the Strategy to be relevant to their needs and priorities.

A key feature of the EU Youth Strategy is that it provides a broad and flexible framework for cooperation in the youth field. Given the high number of possible actions proposed by the Strategy, the vast majority of respondents found at least some of the topics to be of relevance to their own agenda and needs. At the same time, none of the countries worked on all the issues covered. This means that the relevance of the EU Youth Strategy stemmed from the fact that countries see it as an 'à la carte' approach to the OMC rather than a focused set of common objectives that all countries would be working towards.

Recommendation

Focus on a smaller number of more clearly defined and more specific objectives. These should formulate a clear vision of what the Strategy aims to achieve over the next period.

In the countries where youth policy is decentralised, the EU approach to youth policy was considered to be less consistent with the diverse nature of devolved youth policy. Concerns were raised in several countries with decentralised youth policy that the regional and local topics were not sufficiently reflected in the EU youth cooperation framework and that stronger engagement in EU cooperation of local and regional-level policy actors, was needed.

Recommendation

Aim to achieve broader participation in EU activities from the side of local and regional youth policy makers. This also depends on Member States' efforts to disseminate information and opportunities to stakeholders at those levels.

Among the Strategy's eight fields of action, education and employment seem to be relevant to most of the surveyed young people. However, at policy level, the relevance of the areas varies across EU countries. Some Member States call for keeping a high focus on the issues which are of burning importance, namely employment, education and training. On the other hand, other countries see the need to increase attention to core youth areas of intervention, such as youth work, volunteering and participation, which have been overshadowed in the aftermath of the economic crisis, but to which the youth cooperation framework can most meaningfully contribute.

Recommendation

If the double focus of EUYS is maintained (on one hand focus on core youth issues and on the other hand on youth mainstreaming) then the objectives in the field of mainstreaming should be formulated more specifically, rather than a list of possible actions in eight fields.

Priorities were set however within (1) the triennial work cycles and, (2) since 2014, the EU Work Plan for Youth, which should be more known to all stakeholders.

The triennial priorities and those set under the annual youth work plan should be communicated clearly by multipliers (agencies, ministries, etc.) to relevant youth stakeholders at national and local levels.

The relevance of the EU Youth Strategy's priorities and activities is not at the same level for all countries. In countries which, in 2010, were further away from alignment with the principles promoted by the renewed EU youth cooperation framework, the Strategy was perceived as being more relevant than in those countries whose approaches and objectives were already close to what the renewed framework aimed to achieve.

New challenges have emerged since the design of the EU Youth Strategy in 2009. The emerging issues most frequently reported are: radicalisation, integration of migrants and digitalisation. These topics could be covered by the existing fields of action, but they could also be self-standing priorities.

At EU level, the objectives and priorities of the EU Youth Strategy were overall coherent to the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy. However, this is mainly due to the broad topical coverage of the youth cooperation framework rather than the efforts to align the two strategies. The two were often perceived by the stakeholders interviewed as separate approaches, each with their own objectives, rather than part of an integrated long-term plan of the EU. Moreover, despite the increasing number of EU initiatives touching on young people, references made to the EU Youth Strategy are few.

Recommendation

Improve coordination of the youth agenda at EU level. Ensure a clearer link between the structured dialogue consultations and developments in other policy fields than youth. Consider putting EU Youth Strategy's implementation instruments to use beyond the youth field.

Effectiveness

The evaluation found that the EU Youth Strategy was successful in triggering concrete changes at national and organisational level and in the adoption of common approaches and principles across the Member States. Youth policies in countries which did not have clear frameworks in this area have been clarified and framed. There was a general movement across EU countries towards the adoption of principles and objectives set in the EU Youth Strategy, such as participation and the consultation of young people. The Strategy had some direct influence on the policy agenda in the majority of Member States although the level and strength of influence varied – recognizing it was not the only contributing factor but national and contextual factors were also influential. Most changes identified were in areas that are core to youth policy: volunteering, internationalisation and mobility, youth work and cross-sectoral approach to youth policy. Influence was also reported, but less frequently, in the areas of recognition of non-formal and informal learning, youth entrepreneurship and measures to address those not in employment, education or training (NEETs). This means that the EU Youth Strategy has been most influential in the core areas of youth policy.

However, the evaluation findings show that the EU Youth Strategy could be more influential if better known and understood by key stakeholders. Not all interviewed policy-makers in the youth field were aware of the objectives and instruments of the Strategy while the awareness was even lower among policy-makers from other policy sectors. Only a small share of youth organisations surveyed reported having a good basic understanding of the Strategy. Similarly, only a small share of young people surveyed were aware of the EU Youth Strategy while many more were aware of the EU programme for young people.

Among the youth organisations that were involved in activities under the EU Youth Strategy, the vast majority reported that their participation led to changes in their practices in terms of learning and knowledge-building, creating new partnerships, developing new activities and networking with stakeholders and policy-makers. They also saw broader effects on youth policy, recognition of the value of youth work and of volunteering, better understanding of youth issues among stakeholders and improved youth participation, amongst others.

Concerning the instruments of EU youth cooperation, the evaluation found that the most influential tools have been the structured dialogue and the mobilisation of EU funds as well as, to a certain extent, mutual learning and knowledge-building. When different instruments and tools were joined together and built on each other's results,

they were most effective in influencing a context to catalyse efforts and initiate change. This was not systematically the case however, as some initiatives were perceived as 'stand-alone' or 'fragmented'.

Recommendation

Align the use of cooperation instruments with the EU Youth Strategy's objectives more clearly and strategically. This applies also to creating explicit links between funding programmes and the objectives set at political level, within the EU cooperation framework (Council Recommendation included).

As regards the implementation of the Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers, its integration under the EU Youth Strategy allowed for cross-border volunteering to be kept among the permanent cycle of priorities of the EU youth cooperation. However, this makes it challenging to distinguish the effects in the field of cross-border volunteering influenced by the Council Recommendation from the effects produced in the volunteering field influenced by the EU Youth Strategy at large. The evaluation found that some of the needs identified in the Council Recommendation remain relevant, especially those concerning information and dissemination about cross-border volunteering opportunities; making volunteering mobility more accessible to young people with fewer opportunities; reducing barriers to volunteering mobility and supporting improvements in quality systems of managing volunteers.

Recommendation

Whilst the Council Recommendation covered the needs of young people and youth organisations, in relation to cross-border volunteering, those needs are still relevant at the end of the evaluation period. It would be beneficial to make the links to funding opportunities more explicit in order to help youth stakeholders reach the objectives set. Member States and youth organisations should be encouraged to allocate their own resources (and beyond the European Volunteering Service EVS) to respond to the demand, in each country, for cross-border volunteering.

Efficiency

The resources allocated to EU cooperation activities in the youth field are generally small. Nonetheless, even with a relatively low budget, the EU youth cooperation was successful in triggering changes at national and organisational level. The budget is however spread across a large number of activities covering many fields of action, which means that is often being spread thinly.

The evaluation found that the costs of the EU cooperation in the youth field were overall found to be reasonable in relation to the results it contributed to: expertise and tools accessed, inspiration provided and effects on policy re-orientations.

However, some obstacles to efficiency have been identified in the course of the evaluation. The main challenges, reported by the majority of stakeholders, were the limited resources available at national level to take full advantage of the EU cooperation structures and inefficiencies related to certain specific instruments or activities, such as the unclear mandate of the Expert Groups and the burdensome exercise for the progress reporting. Another key challenge was found to be the inefficiency of the two monitoring mechanisms – the dashboard of youth indicators and the triennial reporting by Member States – which fail to clearly capture the actual contribution of the EU Youth Strategy to youth policy. To better capture the outcomes of the EU Youth Strategy, a monitoring framework linked to the Strategy's intervention logic could be designed and implemented. It could reflect, among others, the follow-up of the structured dialogue outcomes, both at EU and national levels, such as providing information on where (which policy sector) and how (which initiatives) the dialogue recommendations had an effect.

Recommendation

Set up a monitoring framework which actually captures the achievements of the EU Youth Strategy. Consider developing mutual learning on progress achieved.

EU added value and sustainability

The key added value of the EU Youth Strategy was in providing Member States with: Inspiration, knowledge and expertise (via exchange of good practices, data produced etc.)

Leverage and legitimacy to make claims consistent with the EU Youth Strategy, such as promoting youth work, youth participation and inclusion of young people, among others.

Opportunities and resources (including financial ones) to move towards the commonly-agreed objectives within the EU youth cooperation framework.

The EU Youth Strategy did spur a number of long lasting effects in several Member States through the adoption of new frameworks and, in some instances, legislations. It influenced the strengthening and clarifying of the framework for youth policy in those countries where it was further away from the Strategy's principles. Consultation structures were created, strategies adopted and certain laws, mostly in the field of volunteering, were revised.

The evaluation found that the EU Youth Strategy's structures, processes and instruments are overall sustainable both directly and indirectly through the sustainability of the national youth laws, strategies and policies it inspired. However, to continue facilitating the EU cooperation in the youth field, the framework needs to be refreshed by refining some of the implementation instruments.

Overall there is continued interest among the Member States in having cooperation on youth issues at EU level. The vast majority of respondents show continued willingness to participate in EU youth cooperation activities. This also applied to continuing their involvement in cross-border volunteering opportunities and implementing the action lines described in the Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers.

Countries' starting point today is different to the period when the Strategy was adopted - reflecting the fact that youth policies have also moved forward. As initial conditions for youth policy were created or supported, the next stage of the youth cooperation at EU level will need to target other types of developments. It should aim to add value by offering new inspiration also for those countries which were already aligned with the EU Youth Strategy's principles and objectives in the previous period. This means that some Member States are likely to have more needs and interest in cooperation than others, and cooperation on some issues may also be limited by national particularities in relation to certain youth principles and definitions.

Recommendation

Raise the bar of what the EU youth cooperation aims to achieve by formulating more ambitious objectives which would also constitute a new impetus for those countries with a strong tradition of youth policy. This also applies to the Council Recommendation, which, whilst having been relevant to the needs of young volunteers and of volunteering organisations, could have been more ambitious and links to funding programmes made more explicit.

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