



# Annual meeting of International Stakeholders active in the field of Youth

22 October 2021

# REPORT



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## CONCEPT NOTE AND AGENDA

Considering the current pandemic crisis, which is challenging traditional spaces for dialogue, the meeting ensured a space for interaction and mutual understanding among players of the youth sector at inter-regional level: international entities, inter-governmental institutions and youth-led umbrella organisations.

The on-line event was designed to be a safe and dynamic space for dialogue, peer-learning and partnership building, where inputs and initiatives are shared, commented and combined in an informal, yet technical manner.

The meeting's starting point was the sharing of the different ways in which major players in the youth sector are adjusting their agendas, programmes and initiatives according to the current unexpected circumstances, assessing together the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on entities working with young people.

The online meeting also explored perspectives, insights and concerns in order to find a common ground in terms of priorities, challenges and messages worth being mainstreamed at inter-regional level to preserve the centrality of youth policies and of the role of young people also during these challenging times.

The main aims were to create/maintain connection among like-minded organisations, to draw a picture of the state of art of the current situation at interregional level and to share the challenges of the youth sector amidst the pandemic. In some parts of the globe, in fact, the COVID-19 pandemic brought additional concerns related to the shrinking space for civil society.

The meeting was organized in the framework of the "Global youth" project promoted by the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe to foster youth participation and global citizenship through inter-regional cooperation. The project seeks a greater interaction and coordination among international players of the youth sector, who usually have scarce opportunities to discuss, share, learn and cooperate if not within specific project/programme frameworks or at the margins of institutional public fora. More frequent and structured, yet informal, moments of dialogue among international entities, inter-governmental institutions and youth-led umbrella organisations could contribute to the creation of a new momentum for the youth sector.

A second more pragmatic and practical meeting is foreseen in October 2020 with the view of encouraging synergies to avoid overlapping of initiatives during 2021 (which will probably be very dense in events) and increase the impact assessing the need of youth beneficiaries.

With these two meetings in 2020 (and a next one in 2021), the North-South Centre and its partners intend to create a path for dialogue, peer-learning and partnership to build a stronger multilevel global governance.

### Agenda:

<b>20 min</b>	<b>Plenary - Introduction</b>  Welcome by Celina de Felice, lead facilitator of the meeting  Opening remarks by Rocío Cervera, Deputy Director of the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe  Aims of the meeting and presentation of the agenda  Round of introductions (practical exercise to break the ice)
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<p><b>40 min</b></p>	<p><b>Group Work - Part 1: Challenges and lessons learnt</b></p> <p>Participants will be divided into groups, where a discussion will be facilitated focusing on the following guiding questions:</p> <p>What are the global challenges facing youth that your organization is currently responding to?</p> <p>What are the challenges your organisation faces when responding to them?</p>
<p><b>15 min</b></p>	<p><b>Plenary</b></p> <p>Summaries of group discussions will be shared with all participants.</p>
<p><b>10 min</b></p>	<p><b>Recess</b></p> <p>Participants will be asked to contribute to a white board adding a post that describes the differentiating factor of their organisation in addressing the challenges above.</p>
<p><b>40 min</b></p>	<p><b>Group Work - Part 2: Opportunities for cooperation</b></p> <p>Participants will be divided into groups, where a discussion will be facilitated focusing on the following guiding questions:</p> <p>What should be the focus of our cooperation efforts to support a global youth partnership for development, peace, and global citizenship?</p> <p>Which emerging opportunities for collaboration do you see in the short and medium term? Any concrete proposals?</p>
<p><b>15 min</b></p>	<p><b>Plenary</b></p> <p>Summaries of group discussions will be shared with all participants.</p>
<p><b>10 min</b></p>	<p><b>Conclusions and follow-up</b></p>

## PARTICIPANTS

Organisation	Name	Position
African Union	Pempho Rodson Chabvuta	Youth Division
United Nations	Lili Vessereau	Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth Expert on Gender Equality
European Commission	Agata Sobiech	DG DEVCO/DEAR Head of Sector – Youth
	Viviana Galli	DG DEVCO/DEAR
League of Arab States	Shaymaa Abdel Moneim	Population Studies and Research Coordinator
United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC)	Alessandro Girola	Youth and Education Programme coordinator
UNFPA	Samir Anouty	Regional Adviser, Youth and HIV/AIDS Arab States Regional Office (ASRO)
UNDP	Osama Aljaber	Political Engagement and Youth Participation Consultant
	Luis Martinez Betanzos	Regional Electoral Advisor Arab States
Union for the Mediteranean	Fatima-Eezahrae Elkbiri	Social and Civil Affairs Youth Officer
Commonwealth Social Policy Development - Youth Division	Layne Robinson	Head of Social Policy Development
	Eileen Goh	Youth Programme Officer
Commonwealth Youth Human Rights and Democracy Network	Karabo Mokgonyana	Network Coordinaoor Youth Human Rights and Democracy Network
	Esanju Maseka	Youth Human Rights and Democracy Network
Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)	Leonie Nagarajan	Director of Education Department
	Freya Chow Paul	Project Officer
	Quentin Fayet	Project Officer
UNESCO	Imane Bounjara	Social and Human Sciences Sector project manager
	Ming Kuok Lim	Youth focal point
Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security	Saji Prelis	Co-Chair - SFCG
FLACJ	Carlos Garcia	National Reference of FLACJ- El Salvador
African, Caribbean and Pacific Young Professional Network (ACP YPN)	Yentil Williams	ACP YPN - Founder & Director
	Gilberto Morishaw	ACP YPN Partnerships Manager
UNOY Peacebuilders	Dorcus Chishumba	Representative for East and Southern Africa
International Coordination Meeting of Youth Organizations (ICMYO)	Benson Makusha	IYCS Africa Coordinator

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Assembly of European Regions - Youth Regional Network (AER-YRN)	Gloria Vitaly	President
UN Major Group for Children and Youth	Mohamed Edabbar	Coordination Team
Network of International Youth Organisations in Africa (NIYOA)	Timothy Onyango	Board member
Asian Youth Council	Regine Guevara	Founder
	Nor Arlene Tan	Producer, Global South Radio / Asian Youth Peace Network
Pacificyouth Council	Miliana Carpenter Iga	Pacificyouth Council
Youth Forum of the Portuguese Speaking Countries Community (FJCPLP)	Aissatu Forbes	President
European Youth Forum (YFJ)	Anja Fortuna	Vice- President
Joint Council on Youth at the Council of Europe	Tilemachos Boni	Member of Advisory Council holding the NSC Portfolio

### *Highlights*

- One of the main challenges facing young people is an increasingly constrained space for civil society-led initiatives and engagement. As they become more vocal, young people are now also at greater risk of being targeted.
- The pandemic has led to the challenge of youth apathy, having forced young people to isolate and disconnect. Apathy is also linked to an increased lack of trust in institutions.
- Specific groups of young people - like young women and members of the LGBTQI+ community - continue to face structural obstacles to participation, and to be underrepresented in youth-focused initiatives.
- Financing of youth-led and youth-focused organisations is shrinking almost everywhere. Donor institutions continue to fund NGOs, but the funds rarely trickle down to young people or youth-led organisations working at the grassroots.

Participants to the meeting were asked to reflect on the following question: what are the global challenges facing youth that your organisation is currently responding to? Following a key recommendation from the 2020 Annual Meeting, contributions were made in the context of smaller groups, with five or six participants each, so as to maximise the time that participants had for talking and interacting with each other.

According to participants, one of the main challenges facing young people in many parts of the world is an increasingly constrained space for civic society-led initiatives and engagement. The reduction of civic spaces can be witnessed, in various forms, across the world, but it has been most evident in non-democratic contexts, where the right of assembly, access to justice, and the right to information have been increasingly limited, often under the guise of anti-pandemic measures.

Linked to this, there are increased challenges in protecting young people when they advocate or exercise their rights and leadership. Indeed, for several participants, the risk that young people face, in exercising even their most basic rights, has never been so high. Because of this, in the words of many participants, this risk justifies a renewed prioritisation of efforts under the protection pillar of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security.

If challenges related to protection are on the rise, many participants were quick to note that challenges related to youth participation are also still very much present all over the world. Youth continue, in fact, to be regularly excluded from civic, democratic and development programmes at all levels (local, national and international). In the view of several participants, this exclusion is often caused by the actions or practises of traditional organisations and older generations. There is, as a consequence, a missing intergenerational perspective on key issues like peacebuilding, security, economic inequality and climate justice. Yet, such an intergenerational lens is necessary to have more inclusive approaches to address the challenges related to the aforementioned themes.

Several among the attendees noted how, as participation has now been a long-held priority for many governments, donor agencies and intergovernmental organisations, there have been improvements: young people are starting to be represented in various decision-making processes, for example around the global climate change negotiations, and their voices are being heard today in ways that were not possible only five years ago. Youth participation, however, is still often limited to consultations, which is not really equivalent to empowering young people to contribute as partners and leaders, or influence decisions. There continues to be, in many initiatives and programmes in different regions of the world, a tokenistic approach to inclusion, with already marginalised young people left out of participation initiatives.

Another serious challenge in the current period, in which societies are trying to transition past the

pandemic, is youth apathy. This has increased significantly over the years, in part because of the self-isolation that restrictions imposed on everyone including young people. The pandemic has upended youth lives everywhere also by disrupting school calendars and social routines. And it has definitely created mental health challenges, which are particularly present among young people and can create challenges to their return to everyday life, including to active civic participation.

Yet, apathy is due in many cases also to young people's lack of trust in institutions. Trust in government and in public sector institutions is diminishing, and this is now extending, in many contexts, to civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and that is a challenge for the whole community of organisations working with youth.

Another aspect is that young people lack access to capital, which often also means access to knowledge and technical capacities. Often they cannot access markets. In the view of participants, this is a challenge that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Financing of youth-led and youth-focused organisations is shrinking almost everywhere. Leading donor institutions continue to fund NGOs, but the money rarely trickles down to young people or youth-led organisations working at the grassroots. If this was true also before, most participants agree that the pandemic has structurally and financially weakened the organisational capacities of regional and local youth organisations. It has also created a challenge in terms of networking, fracturing all those linkages among different youth networks from around the world, which had been built and nurtured in the past years.

Lastly, there are challenges that affect specific groups of young people. Young women and girls continue to face obstacles to participation, which are even more pronounced in the case of indigenous young women, young women with disabilities and from rural areas, and among members of the LGBTQI+ community. As already mentioned, it continues to be very difficult to engage already marginalised youth, for example those who are poor and those who are outside or on the margin of formal educational systems. The way many activities have shifted online has, in this sense, contributed to this gap. Working effectively online requires, in fact, access to technology, connectivity and a pre-existing knowledge of using media (i.e. media literacy), yet young people in many parts of the world do not have these. Working across different time-zones and predominantly in English can also represent an obstacle that prevents many young people from participating in online events or courses.



### **Highlights**

- Established organisations continue to lack the tools and mindset to truly engage young people.
- Creating sustainable partnerships, always a challenge, seems particularly hard to do in the pandemic and post-pandemic period. Youth-led civil society organisations continue, in particular, to be underfunded, overworked and overwhelmed.
- Working online has created opportunities, but also challenges including virtual fatigue and the over-reliance on social media platforms with built-in biases and blind spots.

Participants then moved to discuss the question, what are the difficulties your organisation faces when responding to the challenges described before?

In responding to this question, several participants described the need to change internal mechanisms to better integrate youth into their organisation's work. Several people noted that this requires both time and a mindshift from the organisation. However, this is crucial for every sector where youth participation is important, and having the right internal set-up is necessary to tackle the challenge of real youth representation and inclusion.

While nearly all participants mentioned that their organisation's programmes and initiatives have been ongoing in spite of the pandemic, most agreed that the quality of these efforts has changed, if not decreased. They noted, for example, that it is complicated to engage young people in their own spaces, in the communities and in locations difficult to reach.

Creating sustainable partnerships, which is always a challenge, seems particularly hard to do now. Across organisations working with youth, there remains, in fact, a lack of understanding of the different roles and scopes of the stakeholders involved. Some entities, like the European Commission or UN agencies, find it complicated to explain their scope of actions. Yet, this is often needed to understand the role that various actors have and can have, especially where organisations are asked to collaborate more systematically. Additionally, organisations often work in compartmentalised ways (and larger organisations can indeed have several compartments within them), creating a challenge for coordination.

Importantly, most participants agreed that youth-led civil society organisations continue being underfunded, overworked and overwhelmed. With limited human resources, regular turnover and decreasing financial resources, these organisations, which are supposed to be at the centre of engagement efforts, are often left unable to even have a seat at the table. Indeed, CSOs in general are today more overloaded than they have been in the past, and facing pressures, including from the shrinking of civic spaces, but also from demonstrating the concrete impact of their work as a pre-condition for continued financial support.

All participants also remarked on the challenge of working online. Everyone noted the sense of virtual fatigue, which is clearly linked to how online modalities of work have taken over during the last two years.

Lastly, many organisations have, during the pandemic, relied significantly on social media. Disseminating information and reaching young people on social media platforms can be, however, difficult as it is based on algorithms that have built-in biases and create blind spots. Effective use of social media also requires human resources and money. This creates a situation where it is often the commercial world - the private sector - that decides what information is shared with young people. Grassroots organisations have difficulty in promoting their work online and showing the impact of their results.

### **Highlights**

- In general, organisations should see collaboration as an objective, not just as an approach, and work towards collective impact.
- Guidelines for the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at national level are to be published in early 2022 and an international conference will be organised to disseminate them in January.
- The EU has chosen to make 2022 the European Year of Youth and it is in the process of developing a youth action plan.
- The use of online tools can be improved and, in doing so, efforts to promote networking and collaboration could be effectively improved.

Last but not least, participants were asked to discuss two more questions: what should be the focus of cooperation efforts to support a global youth partnership for development, peace, and global citizenship? And which emerging opportunities for collaboration do they see in the short and medium term?

### **General feedback**

In transitioning from discussing challenges to talking about opportunities, participants offered some general points that, they felt, should be kept in mind and used to frame future collaborations.

First, several participants noted that it is important that cooperation should be not only a tool or an approach, but also a goal in itself. Many organisations continue, in fact, to follow their own agendas and focus on their own objectives, often forgetting that cooperation is a way to reach those very objectives. This is obviously a challenge when and where people are overburdened, but it can also represent a solution to at least some problems related to work overload.

Secondly, several participants noted that there is the need to think not just of impact, but of *collective* impact. Future efforts should not be about individual organisations being able to reach their goals and claim success, but all organisations being able to do so. Collective impact should be a principle, and also a way to promote true youth ownership.

Thirdly, it is good to be reminded that youth are not an homogeneous group, and that organisations should therefore be putting effort in differentiating between young people. This, many participants affirmed, is the first step to promote meaningful partnerships, which should then contribute to integrating youth into all phases of cooperation initiatives, and offering them leadership roles.

Lastly, organisations should try to avoid overlapping or duplicating efforts. In this regard, there is a need to communicate better and work together to avoid conflicting events, which often simply divide the audience. There is also a need for a platform to share opportunities, and spread information on events and an overall calendar of youth-related initiatives

### **Specific opportunities**

Several participants offered specific opportunities for collaboration, both ongoing and forthcoming.

Several organisations are in the final stages of developing guidelines to strengthen the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at country level. This is meant to be a guidance document for national and sub-national governments, and public officials mainly. There is an opportunity for others to join this effort to strengthen what governments can do to promote the implementation of this Agenda, and ensure that governments partner with civil society. There is also a conference in Doha, which is being hosted by the Qatar government, on January 21 and 22, 2022. The event will be online and provide an opportunity to launch the guide.

There is a plan to develop a youth action plan for the European Union's external action. The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the agency responsible for this effort, and has indeed already reached out to many specialised organisations, some among the event's participants, to get their inputs. Yet, the process will be longer and offer other opportunities for engagement.

At the European level, 2022 will also officially be the Year of Youth. As part of this, multiple initiatives are planned in and beyond the EU, so this will open up several opportunities for partnership.

Several participants noted that their organisations are currently shifting from focusing on participation to protection. Within the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security (GCYPS), for example, several members are currently producing a global report on youth protection, which is meant to contribute to both policy and practice. Interestingly, the research effort is showing the specific way in which young people see protection: not merely as a physical issue, but one that is closely linked to socio-cultural threats, and then also as political and digital ones.

The report, and other efforts that are looking into protection in more depth, are showing that there are different tools for enhancing protection, including judicial ones and human rights protection mechanisms. For several organisations, this might mean an increased focus on access to justice as a key issue for future engagement. For participants, this will not necessarily mean a reduction of the attention given to participation, but rather a way to integrate participation and protection efforts.

Organisations are and should focus on strengthening coordination mechanisms. This would be greatly beneficial to address many of the challenges identified during the event and presented in the previous section. Indeed, there should be a stronger focus on designing strategies to develop deeper connections and partnerships, with a view to moving beyond the silos that have traditionally been used to bring actors together - so greater attention should be given to regional collaborative endeavours, connections to the media and North-South partnerships.

To do so, platforms such as this annual meeting are helpful, and indeed they rightfully became more effective and popular during the pandemic. Despite the challenges discussed in the previous sections, online meetings have become much more commonly used, and created opportunities for connecting and sharing information. In the view of many participants, this remains a great opportunity for collaboration and networking, also for contexts where civic space is shrinking, as in those contexts online platforms continue to be, in general, free and accessible, and potentially safer than meeting in -presence.

As organisations will continue to work online, during the period of recovery from the pandemic and in the long-term, there should be more attention on how to better use technology. People can now connect faster, and scheduling and logistical issues have become easier. The spread of social media and smartphones creates plenty of new opportunities for connections, which should be pursued.

Participants then shared some more specific proposals. Some spoke of investing in monitoring organisations' efforts to engage young people globally. Others suggested creating a global youth calendar where organisations working with and on youth can share information about events and opportunities. Some pointed to the need to better engage private sector actors.

Lastly, several participants articulated a desire to re-shape the youth agenda globally, to make it more relevant to the challenges created or brought into relief by the pandemic, and more effective to promote youth agency in peace and development. Some pointed to the rise of youth unemployment as a key issue and a common challenge across the work. This is tied to the debate on climate change, where young people's voices are already very present, and which also includes measures meant to promote greener economies and a rehaul of educational systems. There is also the issue of inequality, visible both through the intergenerational and civil society lens. All this seems to create an appetite for reviewing the priorities that currently guide the youth agenda globally.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the meeting of stakeholders was well attended and it served as an opportunity for participants to bring out and discuss important points about their work. This was a positive outcome, very much aligned with the event's main objectives.

The discussions offered participants a chance to brainstorm, reflect and have discussions that they normally did not have in their day-to-day work. And these discussions were seen as extremely relevant. For example, respondents to the post-event evaluation questionnaire all indicated that they found the meeting either relevant or very relevant to the work of their organisations. The relevance of the exchange is also evident from the way that participants joined the event: conversations were, in fact, lively, with many people ready to listen to others and offer their own interesting, personal and candid insights into the challenges they were facing and how they were reacting to them.

This said, the online format remained somewhat limiting. This year's meeting was structured so as to offer the opportunity for conversations in small groups, and hence make the most of limited time (three hours). This was done also to avert online fatigue, which many people continue to point to as a problem. While this partly worked, the online format of the meeting could still be improved. One participant, for example, suggested having a pre-meeting, which could be a good way to make the event lighter by separating introductions from substantive discussions.

Nevertheless, the opportunity was appreciated and by all accounts participants made the most of it. The utility of the online format was validated, while the experience helped to further define best practises that should make future online meetings more effective still.

For more info:  
**Graziano Tullio**  
[NSC.youthcooperation@coe.int](mailto:NSC.youthcooperation@coe.int)