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Debate on " Strong democracies through youth engagement at local level"

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When listening to the speeches and interventions made in the Council of Europe, the phrase "youth are the future" is used in almost every debate. The problem with this phrase is the tense that is being used. The future tense. The youth are seen as future decision makers and the future of our democratic structures, but actually, youth are the PRESENT because in order to achieve the sustainable, inclusive, and equitable future that we are striving for, we need to start TODAY. Youth are not spectators, we're stakeholders and co-creators of the present, and we must have a place at the decision-making table. Thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning.

In order to thrive, democracies require the active participation of all citizens. Youth engagement at local levels is the foundation of strong democracies because local engagement is the first entry point in participatory involvement. The local level is where the impact of the decision-making is closest to its recipients, where it is tangible and direct.

As youth delegates representing over 40 countries who come from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, we are united through our passion to make meaningful change in our communities. To help achieve this, we have drafted recommendations to increase youth participation at the local level.

The youth delegates agreed that many of the most useful tools and mechanisms to promote youth participation have already been set out by the CoE, the problem is that we need to improve their IMPLEMENTATION; Hence, I will first speak about how we can adapt the existing strategies to improve their effectiveness locally. I will then discuss additional proposals for increasing youth participation.

Expanding the scope and effectiveness of the existing strategies will further support and promote increased youth participation. We must continue to emphasize the importance of extensive and committed implementation of the recommendations in order to create fundamental and sustainable change. Efforts must also be developed to monitor and continually assess the implementation process of the CoE's recommendations.

First, we turn the attention to the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. This document is fundamental and should occupy a central role in informing youth participation in local communities. Another important resource is the CoE Democracy Here Democracy Now's campaigns' Call to Actions. Together these documents represent an inclusive and far-reaching guide for improving youth participation, especially in reference to rural and non-metropolitan areas. These documents should be routinely shared widely amongst institutions, politicians, and the wider civil society.

Now we will discuss some of our suggestions.

Since we focus in this session on the local level we adjusted some of the council's broader key strategies into their most fitting version for local communities.

We want to highlight the co-management approach of the Council of Europe, where youth organisations and governments have an equal say in determining programme priorities and activities. This is the form of direct democracy that we are striving for.

Our suggestion? Implementing this mechanism into local communities. We need stronger co-operation on local and regional level between the youth and the representatives. What we propose is cooperation on the basis of consensus or consultations between the local representatives focusing on youth topics and the respective youth councils of the regions. Youth councils exist in every community, for example in the form of student or youth councils. Since those bodies are already present, the threshold of elevating their civic status should not be unattainable. Incorporating youth representatives in local authorities on the scrutiny committees with speaking rights and even with some voting rights, will be a significant step. We believe thus that it would be valuable to introduce the idea of reserving certain slots in local authority bodies for them to be covered by youth.

What we also want to highlight is the importance of open spaces for the youth. Providing physical spaces for us in our local communities will enable us to better tap into the local youth networks and share ideas, collaborate on projects, and utilize each other's different skill sets, to create change! The number of public youth centres and available places for creative exchange in the member states, is unfortunately significantly limited. The European Youth centres & Euroclubs are success stories that local communities can have as orientation. We need more spaces on a local level everywhere. Special attention should be put on the geographical disparity in the available places between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as metropolitan and rural areas. Open spaces available to the youth can simply be a room in a public building. It is in the administrative power of local authorities to create opportunities for assembly by securing such spaces. Providing such an option would lift a significant organisational barrier for young people. It is feasible, cost-effective and can be quickly introduced in each local community.

For the youth to be able to kickstart activities and initiatives, it is substantial to have access to the local representatives that have authority over youth matters. It is thus important to have a clearly defined government authority or spokesperson of the government on youth, who will serve as a coordinating actor for youth-related issues. It is important that it is clear who is responsible for that so that interested youth can turn to them for more information. You see, local representatives can help provide their expertise, guidance, platforms, and resources to make sure that youth ideas GO somewhere- that those ideas are implemented.

What is additionally needed are opportunities for young people to start projects. An excellent example of youth engagement is the Rejuvenating Initiative, as young people can obtain the floor and talk and be heard by the politicians of Europe. We need more of such initiatives on a local level that function as a ticket for opening doors into new local projects. With the support of projects like this, it is easier to find venues, speakers and participants for events and actions. We need more such initiatives on a local level. This in combination with the allocation of funding and resources to the youth for the purposes of organizing activities are crucial steps for the implementation of their ideas.

The youth is here, they always were, and they always will be. The key to reaching more youth participation is the implementation of the recommendations! We need to live by the words we write in these documents. Continuity and consistency are key, so that youth participation is not a fragmented, occasional occurrence but an undetachable part of local democracies. We are the future and the present; let's start participating more now!

Thank you!