



Reimagine our future: youth policies meeting new realities.

The role of the European Youth Card in connecting emerging topics with youth policy development.

18 -19 November 2021

Valletta, Malta

Why this seminar?

Miriam Teuma, Chief Executive Officer of [Aġenzija Żgħażaġh of Malta](#), opened the seminar, while highlighting the importance of its theme. The pandemic has had an impact in young peoples' lives and in youth related services and programmes. There is the need to look at current challenges, identify new emerging topics and the way-forward for the field. She referred to three main elements of the seminar: to understand the impact of the pandemic, namely through the presentation of research findings, to share and learn from good practices, such as the ones of the European Youth Card Association member organisations, and to have a forward-looking discussion on the future of youth work and policy in (post) pandemic and recovery times.

Natalja Turenne, on behalf of the Council of Europe, took the floor to present the work developed by this international organisation in the field of youth, in particular in what regards the [Partial Agreement on Youth mobility through the Youth Card](#). One of the priorities of the Partial Agreement for 2021 is to “*support and encourage innovation in youth work and youth services, especially in the context of COVID-19 challenges*” and it was within this framework that the seminar was held.¹

Manel Sanchez, Director of the [European Youth Card Association](#) (EYCA) briefly shared the background of the seminar and acknowledged the efforts of the youth field, in particular of EYCA organisations, in responding to the challenges faced by young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The seminar was planned as an opportunity to collect insights and suggestions on how the European Youth Card (EYC) can support youth work and policy developments related to emerging topics.

New realities for Young People

Three surveys were conducted over the past two years within the framework of the [Knowledge Hub](#) of the [Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth](#), on the impacts that the pandemic of COVID-19 is having on the lives and futures of young people.

James O'Donovan is one of the experts on the Knowledge Hub and was the keynote speaker of this session. He was involved in compiling, analysing and reporting on these surveys and he shared the main findings and future policy implications for the youth sector. The first and second surveys (2020-2021) focused on issues such as communication with young people, funding and policy initiatives, and impact on and response of both state and NGOs' services and programmes. The third survey (2021) was dedicated to the impact on the mental health and well-being of young people, the impact of the pandemic of COVID-19 on digitalisation and post-pandemic priorities.

¹ Presentation is available [here](#).

[Main findings](#) highlight that the pandemic situation had a severe impact in services and programmes addressed to young people and that there is the current need to pay more attention to youth communication and information, mental health of young people and the pros and cons of digitalisation on young peoples' lives. In addition, the surveys show that young people with low income, as well as young women, young migrants and young people living in rural areas have been disproportionate and negatively affected by the pandemic situation.

Some issues were already a priority, but the last 18 months have reinforced their importance, such as the need to foster civic engagement of young people, promote non-formal education, strengthen capacity building and ensure financial support for youth work, and increase cooperation amongst different sectors.

Sharing EYCA members practices

To offer latest information and inspiration (based as well on good practices) was a key dimension of the seminar. To achieve such objective, EYCA member organisations shared their knowledge and experience in delivering services and programmes to young people during the last year and a half.

There were two sessions of practices, intercalated with small group discussions with participants, where they also had the opportunity to relate to what was presented, share their practices, identify main challenges faced by young people as well as emerging topics in the youth field. In this section, we share the main outcomes of the presentations, in the next one we will give a brief overview of participants' input to the overall discussion.

The European Youth Card and youth participation & empowerment in pandemic times

Jason Zammit - Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, Malta

Enabling spaces for youth participation and policy shaping in pandemic times

[Presentation](#)

Jason presented the ways the agency adapted and shifted its focus from offline to online to allow for youth participation during the pandemic of COVID-19. He shared some of their success stories, including on how to set-up a national youth policy during pandemic times, the different initiatives in reaching out to young people and offering spaces for participation (with student councils, on young parliamentarians).



Jason reflected on how the agency dealt with uncertainty, developing the capacity to adjust to circumstances, moving from online to offline from in-school to out-of-school contexts. In addition, he referred the importance of research to have a better knowledge of the reality and to develop evidence-based policies and programmes.

At the end, Jason listed three main learning points, to take forward for the future of their work: 1) that young people are still open to participate, even during pandemic times; 2) in time of crises we should look for help and collaborate with the right sectors and partners for each initiative; and 3) that youth work approach has been key to their success and that further investment on it is needed.

Emanuela Rubbino - Lazio Crea, Italy

EYC as a tool to connect youth and decision makers

[Presentation](#)

Emanuela shared the work of Lazio Crea regarding youth policy at regional level. She presented the Lazio Youth Card, while reminding that it is much more than discounts. In that context, Emanuela referred to their work in promoting the EYC from a tool for engagement (e.g. *Lazio Sound*, *Vitamina G* initiatives) to an advocacy tool (EYCA's #STANDFORSOMETHING campaign).

She also presented different initiatives that were held during the lockdown period, which allowed young people to exchange on topics such as LGBT+ community as well as to engage in discussions with experts/NGOs and policy makers.

Emanuela ended her presentation with an invitation to use EYCA membership to reach out to and engage young people in the upcoming [2022-European Year of Youth](#).

Nikolay Yordanov - Comunidad de Madrid, Spain

EYC as a tool to empower youth talent and creativity

[Presentation](#)

Nikolay brought a local perspective on the EYC, from Madrid. He presented the main findings of a survey conducted at the end of 2020 which focused on the impact of COVID-19 on young people's lives and registered close to 340 000 responses – a clear example on the outreach capacity of the card.



Two of the main conclusions were: 1) there was an overall concern with mental as well as physical health and well-being; and 2) that despite increased digitalisation, the human factor remains important for young people.

Based on the results of the survey, they reinforced efforts to offer opportunities to practice sport and enjoy outdoor activities. They also ran a campaign to promote healthy lifestyle.

The European Youth Card and new realities for youth

Nassim Djabam - SLOAM, Slovenia

EYC as a tool to promote youth social entrepreneurship and helping youth thriving during pandemic

[Presentation](#)

Nassim presented SLOAM's experience in fostering partnerships with municipalities, while sharing useful and practical tips on how to do it.

He briefly presented the initiatives Social Impact Award and the Impact Hub, as tools for change-making and impact entrepreneurship, which also count with public universities, high schools and companies as partners.

Nassim invited all to further engage municipalities in their work because, despite the challenges, it allows to reach out to young people and have concrete impact at local level.

Yugoslav Radovijc - Centre for Youth Education, Montenegro

Using EYC as a tool for local youth policies

[Presentation](#)

Yugoslav brought a local perspective. He shared the efforts of the Centre for Youth Education in fostering recognition of the EYC at official level. The card has been recognised as of public interest for the period 2022-2024. They have enlarged the scope of their work as well as the partnerships established.

Cooperation with local municipalities has been key to develop concrete local initiatives and have allowed the exchange young people with local policy makers.



Lily Elenkova – NYCA, Bulgaria

EYC as a tool to research emergent needs of youth post-pandemic (presentation of research results)

[Presentation](#)

Lily brought a comprehensive overview on youth policy development to the discussion. She mentioned the strategic frameworks of the Council of Europe and of the European Union in this matter. She highlighted that the main aim of youth policy should be to support young people. She underlined the importance of considering four dimensions when developing a youth policy: good shape (mental and physical), learning, participation, and inclusion. In addition, it should include the following main elements: youth research, training, sharing good practices, youth work – all requirements for a successful national youth policy.

Lily ended by highlighting the importance of research to base youth policy development, and the work developed in Bulgaria in understanding the impact of COVID-19 related measures on the lives of young people.

Reflecting on current challenges and emerging topics

Participants in Malta, as well as the ones attending remotely, had the possibility to engage in smaller group discussions in both mornings, following the presentations of EYCA members.

They were invited to share about the challenges they are currently facing, given the new realities of young people and how they are approaching them. Although space was given to reflect on what happened since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the discussion focused on the present and future of youth work and policies and the contribution of the European Youth Card.

Though youth services and programmes were quickly adapted, and new responses have been put in place, it is important to be aware that youth work has its limits. Though international mobility shall remain a key element of our work, the pandemic situation also reinforced the importance of keeping investment in local activism and participation.

As main challenges, it was mentioned the difficulties faced in keeping young people engaged during lockdown and in a long-term perspective. Online fatigue, which can lead to lack of motivation to continue engaging online, was another important challenge identified.

For the future, participants consider that although digitalisation has offered solutions, such as offering digital cards and online opportunities of youth participation, there is the need to find a balance as digital opportunities are not enough, and human connection is a key feature of youth work – blended/hybrid approaches can be a way forward.

To make the best use of digitalisation, there is the need to offer digital skills development of both young people and youth workers, including on how to make digitalisation more inclusive, ensuring that no young person is left behind. In this context, EYCA's maximising impact programme could play a role.

Furthermore, in times of uncertainty, empathy and the human dimension of youth services and programmes need to be reinforced. In this context, there might be the need to provide orientation to young people to support navigation through these pandemic times. Young people are facing times of great uncertainty, lack of plans, difficulties in accessing labour market, sense of insecurity, therefore, orientation services in different areas would be advisable (professional, health and mental care, educational, etc.). The EYC can, amongst other possibilities, support in reaching out to the ones in need.



When returning to face-to-face initiatives, it is important to make international mobility attractive again, facilitating travelling and to ensuring safe spaces, also regarding COVID-19 requirements. Youth services and programmes providers need to keep fostering young people's curiosity on European identity and culture. In this context, though EYC is much more than discounts, this feature can play an important role in pushing for mobility, by offering concrete opportunities in this regard (for example, railways).

Apart from the smaller group discussions, participants were invited to share few [pictures](#) on how they reimagine the future of youth work and policies. While presenting them, they shared their message. Strengthening cooperation, self-care, networking as well as highlighting the importance of education and youth work were main elements mentioned. The Sustainable Development Goals were referred as a relevant framework to take into consideration while reimagining our future. Finally, though we can not predict the future, we can plan different moves and options to be able to give concrete responses to the challenges faced by young people.



Reimagining our future: youth work and policies meeting emerging realities

The panel discussion was an opportunity to share different perspectives, including from youth policy makers and youth representatives, on how is the field evolving in (post) pandemic and recovery times. It addressed emerging initiatives on youth work and policies to tackle new realities. Some proposals on how the EYC can support new developments were also mentioned.

Miriam Teuma, CEO of Agenzija Zghazagh and Chair of the **Steering Committee for Youth of the Council of Europe**, launched a question to the audience and overall youth field: “*What to do in the coming years?*”, setting the tone of the panel discussion. She shared how the new Council of Europe Youth strategy focus on what can young people get from the organisation and the benefits of having them implementing the core values of the Council of Europe: human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Miriam mentioned that they went through an internal reflection to see if the youth sector strategy until 2030 remains valid, considering the impact of the pandemic. The conclusion is that not only the priorities remain valid, but they also became even more important. Access to human rights, revitalising pluralistic democracy, living together in diversity and youth work will remain at the core of the initiatives of the youth sector of the Council of Europe. In this context, Miriam shared briefly about the upcoming 2022 campaign of the Council of Europe on democracy for youth, which aims to foster full and meaningful youth participation, while connecting digitalisation and democracy.

Babis Papaioannou, Policy Officer at the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the **European Commission**, referred to the youth priorities for the coming years, namely: inclusion & diversity, green, digital and youth participation. In addition, he mentioned that for 2022 we will see different initiatives related to youth policy dialogue including the implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda, mutual learning activities, recovery support to youth work, and cross-sectorial efforts within the European institutions, under the coordination of the EU Youth Coordinator.

He referred to the cooperation with the Council of Europe, namely on research and in the framework of the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth. Babis mentioned current and upcoming flagship processes relevant to youth work and policy such as the Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Year of Youth – 2022. Babis recalled the importance of strong engagement of relevant youth stakeholders, such as EYCA, as a key element of success for the initiatives mentioned. He left an invitation for all youth actors to contribute to the European Year of Youth, though exact opportunities of collaboration and coordination still need further elaboration.



Kristina Filletti, Secretary-General of the **National Youth Council of Malta**, brought a youth perspective, both as a young person and as representative of a youth organisation, to the discussion. She gave examples on the impact of the pandemic and related measures on young people, while also sharing a positive message that it has been a productive and creative time.

Kristina shared the current challenges to promote youth activism and participation and recalled the importance of non-formal education and youth work. She called attention to the impact on young people's mental health and the consequences of climate change. Kristina ended with a call to activism, mentioning that there are many and different opportunities for young people to participate.

Lydia Siapardan, **Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe**, shared her concern on how the pandemic has exacerbated structural inequalities and on the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young people in realising their human rights, in particular the rights to education, adequate housing and decent work. In this context, she highlighted the importance of more socially inclusive youth policies, that recognise the importance of youth work and support youth workers who engage at grassroots' level and with young people in marginalised and vulnerable situations.

To conclude, Lydia shared few proposals on how the EYC could contribute to social inclusive policies, highlighting its role in creating a sense of community, its accessibility, and the capacity to reach out to young people from diverse backgrounds.

Manel Sanchez, **Director of the European Youth Card Association**, referred to their process in setting up EYCA's strategy with member organisation, young people and cardholders. During the pandemic the organisation decided to review its strategy and reached the conclusion that, despite the need for few adjustments, the main goals should remain the same. He shared that the pandemic has exacerbated already existing challenges, giving them more visibility and recalling the urgency to work on them – such as digitalisation, mental health and climate change.

Manel mentioned the role of EYCA in supporting its member organisations, valuing their diversity and how important it is to ensure a bottom-up approach and to continue reaching out to non-organised youth.

He recalled that EYC is a card for opportunities, that offers services beyond discounts and has a role in fostering mobility, which hopefully will remain as a key element of youth services and programmes, and in leaving no one behind.



Closing

Natalja (Council of Europe), Manel (EYCA) and Miriam (Agenzija Żgħażaġħ of Malta) shared some final remarks, thanking everyone for their participation and committing to follow-up on the main conclusions of this seminar, while planning future initiatives on youth work and policies.