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Sustainable development in the Western Balkans: Is youth on board?

Policy Recommendations

1. Responding to the demands of the market the relevant institutions throughout the region should develop fast-track programmes advancing the needed skills from youth and enabling further professional development.
2. Regional development initiatives must be specifically designed to target youth in need and guarantee that their views and interests are equally represented.
3. National institutions should ensure youth participation when designing policies.

Abstract

Today, the Western Balkan region suffers from a situation of fragmentation characterised by high unemployment rates especially among youth, brain drain, high migration rates, low levels of trust in public institutions due to rooted corruption, devastated health systems caused by the impact of COVID-19, weak economies and harmed environments. Among the ongoing agendas that aim to address most of the aforementioned issues is the current European Union's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which represents a good opportunity for a meaningful inclusion of youth in decision-making processes. This major investment plan aims to support human capital development, sustainable connec-

tivity, competitiveness and inclusive growth, twin energy and digital transition in order to spur the COVID-19 recovery of the region and harmonisation with European Union initiatives. However, so far very little attention has been directed toward the inclusion of youth within these topics and projects. While only one flagship project directly targets youth, the others merely touch upon the need to include the next generation.

This Policy Brief aims to focus on the mechanisms in place and the space they offer to ensure youth participation in sectoral policy-making. Furthermore, the authors provide recommendations for increasing youth participation and establishing more inclusive and youth-friendly policies.

* This Policy Brief is based on the Connecting-Youth Platform's previous research on the Economic and Investment Plan from the perspective of youth.



Sustainable development in the Western Balkans: Is youth on board?

Where does the Western Balkans' youth stand in regional development agendas?

The Western Balkan region faces different challenges deriving from the respective stage of political transition and the unstable socio-economic development. Starting from the climate change, brain drain, weak economies, high levels of migration, and other socio-political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the region needs a multi-layer human-centred response to be able to start addressing these challenges.

The Economic and Investment Plan (EIP)¹ for the Western Balkans (WB) adopted by the European Commission in October 2020², represents a good opportunity to address and shift the focus toward youth involvement in sectoral policy-making processes from their initiation to implementation, with the emphasis on youth being an actor of change throughout the whole process rather than just being a beneficiary.

The development of the Agenda for the Western Balkans on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport addresses the long-term sustainability of such investment within the human capital context. The ever-growing challenges of youth in the Western Balkans, such as emigration, brain drain, unemployment and low-quality education, aim to be addressed through brain circulation, sustainable innovation ecosystems and knowledge-based economies – contributing to more inclusive policy-making and better perspectives for youth in the region. In addition, the main flagship project under the EIP is the **Youth Guarantee** as a solution-oriented intervention that offers employment, further education, training or apprenticeship.

While the EIP represents an excellent opportunity to further foster youth engagement in key sectors, the European Year of Youth together with the award given to Tirana as the European Youth Capital for 2022 (TEYC) both offered a very good momentum to create the necessary synergies in empowering young people, encouraging active participation, promoting European Union's (EU) values, and sharing of best practices among the youth at national, regional and EU level.³ In the case of TEYC, we should be aware that the title came back to the region. As Tirana, a capital of the Western Balkan region was chosen to be the capital of youth for 2022, youth organisations from the region should take this chance to further advocate on their most pressing issues.

1 The EIP aims to foster the post pandemic recovery of the region, its economic development and convergence with the European Union (EU). The €30 billion investment aims to spur public and private investments by the EU and International Financial Institutions. Six priorities with ten flagship projects within this plan have been designed to support human capital development, sustainable connectivity, competitiveness and inclusive growth, twin energy and digital transition.

2 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1811.

3 EU and regional-led side initiatives, such as Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, European Year of Youth 2022, EU Youth Strategy 2019 - 2027, Tirana European Youth Capital 2022, Tirana Connectivity Forum, Connecting Youth Platform, EU Youth Dialogue, Conference on the Future of Europe.



In this framework, as part of TEYC 2022, the National Youth Congress of Albania (NYC) created two dedicated programmes “Youth creates Economy and Innovation” and “Youth Develops Capacities” that directly support innovative ideas of young people through granting schemes, not only as part of youth organisations but also as informal groups and individuals. To ensure such initiatives achieve a sustainable impact, it is crucial for youth and youth organisations to be part of them ever since their inception. Next milestone is to ensure their engagement translates into empowered youngsters that meaningfully advocate and for the good practices to be embedded in decision-making.

A regional youth perspective: Do we have the preconditions to implement the EIP?

Involvement of youth should be seen in a wider perspective that goes beyond initiatives, such as the Youth Guarantee, as part of the Human Capital Flagship of the EIP but rather considering the opportunity of youth access to various priority sectors. Insights collected from six umbrella organisations⁴ in the Western Balkans explain the sectors where youth involvement can be maximised ever since the planning and initiation of flagship projects in the region.⁵

When it comes to the EIP, youth structures in Albania argue for the needed emphasis on intensifying the dialogue between government institutions and youth organisations to ensure alignment of such investments with government strategic documents for the upcoming seven years. Further involvement of civil society is crucial to ensure the effectiveness of such investments.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the disparities between education and labour market play a significant role in the high unemployment rate.

Broad and non-exclusive policies are present in the rest of the WB6 as well. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the disparities between education and labour market play a significant role in the high unemployment rate. Several government measures have been focused on incentivising self-employment through start-ups and entrepreneurship programmes. Due to inadequate design and poor implementation of these policies, youth employability is not sufficiently boosted. In March 2022, through the support of the European Training Foundation, a Report on the Review of Career Development Support System in BiH was published, creating an important baseline for the work both working groups will carry out in the future. The report gives important insights into the current Youth Guarantee and serves as a pathway for its implementation by offering a set of recommendations that would help in its deployment in BiH.⁶

In the case of Kosovo, the main progress was noted in the field of digital transformation in different public sectors. However, COVID-19 further exacerbated all

4 National Youth Congress of Albania, Youth Council of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovar Youth Council, High School Students Union of Montenegro, National Youth Council of Macedonia and National Youth Council of Serbia.

5 https://connecting-youth.org/documents/Position_Paper.pdf.

6 Markuš, R., Suljović, A. (2022), Report on the Review of Career Development Support System in BiH, Torino: European Training Foundation.



shortcomings that youth face when transiting from paper to digital. The skill barrier remains an important obstacle to e-service acceptance from citizens. Socioeconomic challenges, lack of education and lack of technical skills influence to a high extent the use of the e-services. The effect is seen not only in the fact that a majority of the population is deprived of getting the benefits, but it also limits the efficiency and the effectiveness of institutions which should still stick to the traditional devices due to the low use of the e-services.

However, COVID-19 further exacerbated all shortcomings that youth face when transiting from paper to digital.

In Montenegro, while many young men and women choose to study and work at the same time to develop professional skills, institutional regulations put some barriers in front of them. In many cases, where companies and organisations want to organise training and internships in cooperation with higher education institutions, their implementation is not possible because currently there is no legal regulation for internships and practical-work of students during their studies.

When it comes to more concrete measures directed to youth, North Macedonia is a frontrunner in the region with the pilotin and implementation of Youth Guarantee which provides further education, employment, training or internship for recent graduates. Although there are many gaps to be filled, such policies have an impact not only for improving the living standards and in general the living conditions for the young unemployed persons but also in perspective for the European integration process of the country.⁷

In the case of Serbia, Youth Guarantee has also been considered as a solution to boost youth employment. While the recent years have shown an increase in the labour force participation rates, the improvement of the quantity of youth employment was not accompanied by enhanced quality. Studies conducted by KOMS⁸ have shown that a proper introduction of a Youth Guarantee policy framework modelled on the one implemented in the EU would double the stock of young people eligible to receive a quality offer of employment, continued education and training.

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Investing in youth human capital and enhancing the role of youth organisations

Development policies in the region have very often neglected investments in social and human capital by prioritising mostly public investments in infrastructure as an important driver of economic growth. Suggestive evidence shows in fact that developing economies spend less on schools than on roads, and that it takes about a

7 2018 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The document can be accessed here: European Parliament resolution of 29 November 2018 on the 2018 Commission Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (2018/2145(INI)).

8 <https://koms.rs/national-youth-council-of-serbia/>.



generation (almost 24 years) for the output obtained by investing in schools to overtake that delivered by investing in roads.

Consistent investments in human capital and an enhanced inter-sectoral coordination and youth-centred approach in programming public policies leads to a more meaningful engagement of young people in policy design and policy-making processes.

Pressing concerns need fast response. Relevant institutions throughout the region should develop fast-track programmes targeting youth that respond to the demands of the market, advance the needed skills from the young people, and provide further development professionally and/or academically.

Enhancing the degree of cooperation with other youth organisations and civil society actors at any level

While youth organisations need to enhance their sectoral expertise and role, a systemic and consistent partnership at any level with other specialised civil society organisations, that already have an expertise on the ground, can help building the right set of skills and capacities for advocacy in cross-sectoral policies from the youth perspective.

Through training, focus groups and meetings with institutional stakeholders, the National Youth Congress of Albania continues to inform youth, build capacities and share experiences toward the development of this sector by youth.

The work and activism of civil society organisations and in this case youth organisations throughout the region have further encouraged and incentivised youth participation and involvement in different sectors as preparation to enter the labour market. Connecting Youth partner organisations have specialised and advocated for different skills acquisition through specialised training programmes, hence making non-formal education crucial when preparing youth for the labour market. Throughout recent years, among the most notable initiatives on employment education by the National Youth Congress of Albania (NYC) has been eco-entrepreneurship for youth towards a green economy. As a very specific and innovative sector, it has sparked the attention of many young people interested in entrepreneurship, sustainability and the development of green and sustainable start-ups. Through training, focus groups and meetings with institutional stakeholders, NYC continues to inform youth, build capacities and share experiences with regard to the development of this sector by youth. The Tirana European Youth Capital programme NYC and the Municipality of Tirana enabled investments in empowering and upskilling young people through its dedicated programme "Creative Economy and Innovation".

Other similar positive examples of cooperation between the civil society organisations and youth organisations have been notes across the region as noted by the [Connecting Youth Policy Paper](#).

In the case of the EIP, such pairing gains a significant importance, as a stronger and better collaboration with WB6 specialised civil society organisations, think tanks and other interest groups (including here young people) throughout the entire policy-making or project cycle becomes paramount for the successful implementation of the EIP. Specialised WB6 think tanks have brought in their unique knowledge of the local context and their expertise especially on the transparency, the rule of law challenges and on the environmental impact that directly affects the infrastructure projects in the Western Balkan region. Through the initiative "Open Letter toward the EU Institutions", a network of more than 20 specialised WB6 think tanks and civil society



organisations are formally requesting to be part of the new EIP governance mechanism by professionally contributing in the planning and implementation of WB6 infrastructure and representing the WB6 citizens' interest.

The 2021 [Berlin Civil Society and Think Tank Forum \(CSTTF\)](#) doubled down on the role that the citizens must play in keeping responsible authorities accountable through transparency, monitoring and by providing their expertise throughout the entire project cycle.

In that matter, the EIP with its 10 flagship projects⁹ represents a unique opportunity to introduce more decisively the good governance conditionality in the EU financial aid to WB6. Non-governmental actors including civil society organisations; hence youth organisations have an irreplaceable role in enforcing those rules and contributing to more accountable and transparent institutions.

The Economic and Investment Plan with its 10 flagship projects represents a unique opportunity to introduce more decisively the good governance conditionality in the EU financial aid to WB6.

Regional development initiatives targeting youth must be specifically designed to reach youth in need and ensure young people from all backgrounds are equally represented and presented to such initiatives.

On the other hand, the EU should identify and distinctively mobilise youth organisations as a systematic partner; anticipate any opportunity to involve youth not only in the consultation and monitoring phases but also in the programming of relevant project fiches and in their monitoring; increase fundings for youth organisations with a clearly defined strategy; support grassroots movements and youth groupings with the aim of bottom-up mobilisation of local communities.

Social partners should be supported and encouraged to work directly with the EU policies and instruments under the different Director-Generals' competencies, so as to maximise the impact and accelerate social cohesion in the region.

These positive dynamics under the Tirana European Youth Capital 2022 and European Year of Youth 2022 presented an opportunity for the youth sector in the Western Balkans to advance their position in actively monitoring the process of policy design and implementation. The momentum can be further boosted through the European Year of Skills 2023. In addition, closer cooperation and coordination with programmes such as, Youth Manifesto, Interreg, and Erasmus+ for Young Entrepreneurs brings added value to the quality of opportunities presented to youth. Social partners should be supported and encouraged to work directly with the EU policies and instruments under the different Director-Generals' competencies, so as to maximise the impact and accelerate social cohesion in the region.

⁹ <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/EIP-WB-GG-Dec%202022%20%28V6%29.pdf>.



Bringing youth to the tables that count! Strengthening young people's participation in sectoral policies

When it comes to the key areas, such as agriculture, environment, technology, energy and infrastructure, where the EIP can contribute the most in engaging young people of the region, it is important to note that youth involvement should not be seen only in EIP projects that are directly connected to young people such as the Youth Guarantee. Youth should be considered as a group getting involved and consulted in different sectors as well, as all six priorities¹⁰ of the EIP allow enough space for youth to be involved. The current consultative mechanisms and/or strategic planning processes, in which youth involvement and engagement is not mainstreamed, should be revised for the opening of these sectors towards youth to materialise. These include economic competitiveness, youth guarantee, green transition and green agenda, human capital development and digitalisation might be of particular interest for the youngsters, as those are more directly affecting their educational or professional development.

Notwithstanding that regional cooperation has been a driver for enhancing youth position on the regional dimension, a lot needs to be done at national and local level.

Investing in youth competences, networking and advocacy, so as to assure the sustainability, and systemic presence in the policy-making areas relevant to youth, starting from the traditional ones i.e., education, employability, etc. to the less traditional, i.e., maritime economy, transport, etc. should be prioritised. Considering the fragile institutional context of the region, promoting youth institutional connectedness throughout the region and with the EU remains a core priority, as we move forward with different reforms in all areas in the region. Notwithstanding that regional cooperation has been a driver for enhancing youth position on the regional dimension, a lot needs to be done at national and local level.

While EIP flagship projects promise a lot when it comes to recovery and regional cooperation, in reality seen through the lens of youth there is still a lot to be done to ensure inclusiveness, impactful and needs-based policies. To achieve that, national institutions should embed and allocate sufficient funding for youth civil society organisations since the designing phase of policies, e.g. they can ensure youth organisations and youth representatives are part of working groups where public policies are initiated and designed. In addition, IPA III supports the implementation of the YG throughout the WB6. As for the other flagship projects of the EIP good governance matters. Considering the many challenges in terms of capacities and resources local institutions face, the EU should support social partners involved in the YG deployment to increase the accountability of the institutions. Social partners' constructive pressure on the YG institutions is crucial to ensure that the related YG policy toolkit implementation is on the right track.

10 i) Sustainable transport, ii) clean energy, iii) environment and climate, iv) digital future, v) private sector and vi) human capital. More available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/EIP-WB-GG-Dec%202022%20%28V6%29.pdf>.



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