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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: A vision for youth work in Europe – climate change, young people and youth work
- *Policy debate*
(Public debate in accordance with Article 8(2) of the Council's Rules of Procedure)
[proposed by the Presidency]

Following consultation of the Youth Working Party, the Presidency has prepared the attached discussion paper, which is submitted as the basis for the policy debate to take place at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 21-22 November 2019.

Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

Brussels, 21 and 22 November 2019

- Youth policy debate -

"A vision for youth work in Europe – climate change, young people and youth work"

- Presidency discussion paper -

1. *The climate crisis as the most pressing global issue*

The 2018 Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) strongly emphasised that global warming should be limited to 1.5 °C compared to pre-industrial times in order to avoid the most severe consequences of climate change. In May 2019, the United Nations published a Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity, which claimed that the world is ‘on notice’ as one million species face extinction – also linked to climate change. In 2019, the IPCC released special reports on climate change and land and on the ocean and cryosphere. Over the last few years, climate change has surged to the forefront of public awareness and to the top of the political agenda worldwide.

2. *Climate change as a key priority for the European Union*

The European Union has constantly pushed for an increasingly ambitious approach to mitigating climate change, and today preventing the dangerous effects of climate change is one of its key priorities. It has set targets for 2030 for cutting greenhouse gas emissions and increasing renewable energy consumption and energy efficiency. The main EU actions consist of a combination of financial support and regulation. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, young people consider that protecting the environment and fighting climate change, along with education and training and fighting poverty and social inequalities should be the top priorities for the EU in the years to come.

In the youth field, climate change was mentioned in the Commission communication on a new EU Youth Strategy for 2019-2027. The Commission wanted the strategy to ‘equip young people with life skills to cope in a changing world’ and to ‘pay special attention to’ young people as local and global stakeholders, noting that ‘young people are committed to address global challenges, in particular the sustainable development goals’. While the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 does not contain specific recommendations as regards the role of youth in relation to climate change, it aims to ‘encourage and equip young people with the necessary resources to become active citizens’. The European Youth Goals, which are part of the strategy and should provide inspiration for EU policy makers, recognise that ‘society needs to act against climate change and the growing environmental threats’.

3. *Young people: the first on the move*

Interestingly, as with many other societal changes, it was young people who first raised their voices.

The youth climate strikers’ ‘Fridays for future’ campaigns started in 2018, months before the publication of the IPCC Special Report in October 2018. Young people’s climate strikes quickly spread all over the world – and started to gain media attention. Despite expectations that the demonstrations would gradually peter out, they actually kept drawing more and more young people to the streets. The September 2019 climate strikes gathered 6 to 8 million demonstrators in 4 500 locations in 150 countries all over the world. Furthermore, public awareness of and political debate about climate change have reached all-time highs, in particular in the EU.

Youth action on climate change is a prime example of how young people have contributed to push the political agenda forward and enlarge the scope of youth work. The landscape that is emerging as a result gives rise to all sorts of new questions and considerations.

4. *Message to be taken from young people's climate activism*

Young people's climate activism is a phenomenon that certainly deserves reflection, including from the viewpoint of youth work. The first thing to discuss is what kind of obligation or message is conveyed to society and decision-makers by the fact that young people, in large numbers and with spectacular energy, are persistently demanding stricter climate policies. In many countries, their voices have been listened to and politicians and decision-makers have praised young people, found their claims legitimate and promised to promote the fight against climate change – even if, overall, people and politicians are still divided on the issue. Political encouragement might not always be enough: although people can appreciate and understand the concerns of young people, when the time comes for people to actually make sacrifices in their personal lives or in the way companies are managed, for instance, nothing much necessarily happens. This is linked to what is perhaps the most essential task of youth work: to motivate young people to be active citizens and support their belief in participation. The young strikers put a great deal of energy and hope into their action, and if it seems to lead nowhere, there might be severe consequences for their belief in active citizenship.

5. *Towards a methodological and educational renewal*

Taking into account the experience gained with regard to climate change and young people's political activism, youth work should respond to the climate concerns of the young while at the same time noting the differences in their opinions. As youth work allows for outreach to a variety of young people, it could encourage them to become interested in climate change and environmental thinking. Youth workers should be able to talk about climate change and be aware of the effects of climate change on human life and the environment. This is a question not only of supporting young people who are already active, but also of promoting critical thinking and creativity, as well as human rights, democratic values and active citizenship, and also reconceptualising and perhaps rediscovering existing practices within youth work.

There are already a lot of youth work methods for education on nature and the environment, as well as NGOs specialising in those areas. Adventure and outdoor education has long been close to youth work. There are youth centres which focus on ecological education. In today's situation, where young people are increasingly raising the topic with youth workers, it may be reasonable to pool our existing knowledge on practices and engage – with young people's help – in developing new activities and working methods.

Another question is how to organise training and education for youth workers to help them meet young people's expectations. This new situation opens up possibilities for educational renewal. The transition to a more sustainable world can be accomplished only if we do not lose hope that we will find alternative solutions. Young people's active use of digital media (social media, art, video) offers an opportunity for alternative climate imagery, raising awareness of the effects of climate change and suggesting ways to counteract it.

6. *Learning from young people's new forms of active citizenship*

School strikes for climate change attest to the emergence of new forms of youth agency. The movement is not a youth organisation, it is not a youth political party, it is not organised through youth work, it is not a small-group conspiracy and it is not a one-off youth event. School strikes show that if young people are motivated enough, they find a way to express themselves. It might be useful for those involved in youth work to reflect on their own activities and methods in the light of young people's climate action, as well as on what kind of measures we need to complement the existing youth representation models of participation to fit with the emerging forms of active citizenship among young people.

7. *Climate change in youth work as a cross-sectoral challenge*

Climate change is a broad societal issue covering both the public and private sectors, as well as civil society. Cross-sectoral youth policy has been on the youth field agenda for a very long time and is emphasized in the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. Cross-sectoral cooperation on climate change needs to happen at least at three levels: European, national and local. In the EU, climate change action in the youth field has the potential to be linked with action in any sector working on climate change. At government level, any youth policy activity on climate change should be linked with the respective general action plans. As cross-sectoral cooperation seems to be most successful at local level, it might be advisable to create climate change activities which link young people, youth work, other relevant sectors (such as schools), environmental organisations, youth organisations and interested private companies. In municipal youth work, youth services have an opportunity to function as mediators between young people, their activities and decision makers. Often young people express their concerns outside the established structures of representative democracy, through social media, digital communities, artistic expression, music or collective movements (such as school strikes), which might also require further mediation.

8. *Questions for the debate*

In the light of the above, ministers are invited to reflect on one or more of the three following questions (maximum three minutes).

- 1) *How can we strengthen the capacity of youth work to respond to emerging challenges faced by young people in the context of climate change?***
- 2) *How can youth work support young people in their climate activism and in building a sustainable future?***
- 3) *Climate change is a cross-sectoral challenge. How can the youth sector act as a partner in cross-sectoral cooperation?***