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OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

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Subject: Youth Action Plan in EU external action
– Council conclusions (28 November 2022)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on the Youth Action Plan in EU external action, as approved by the Council at its 3914th meeting held on 28 November 2022.

Council conclusions on the Youth Action Plan in EU external action

The Council of the European Union

1. Recognises the significant contributions of youth to the development of a more inclusive, equitable, sustainable and just future. The Council pays tribute to the young people who dedicate every day of their lives to creating a better world. Their vision, engagement and courage deserve the utmost respect and gratitude. Working for, with and by youth is key to eradicating poverty, and achieving sustainable development, prosperity and peace. By putting youth empowerment at the forefront of its external action, the EU is determined to lead by example to enhance young people's full, equal, effective, meaningful and inclusive participation and agency, and make progress towards global commitments in order to build more resilient and inclusive societies. The Council therefore thanks for the guidance on further work for the EU and its Member States as presented in the Joint Communication of the Commission and the High Representative to the European Parliament and the Council on the Youth Action Plan in EU external action 2022 – 2027 (YAP) and commits to the objective of increasing meaningful and active youth participation and youth empowerment in EU external action.
2. Underlines that young people worldwide are essential and reliable partners in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and other major multilateral agreements and instruments, including the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the outcomes of their review conferences, UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and all subsequent related resolutions, UNSCR 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security and their follow-up resolutions, which are at the core of the implementation of the European Green Deal and the New European Consensus on Development and the EU Global Gateway Strategy.

3. Underlines that a stronger engagement by the EU and its Member States with young people worldwide is a prerequisite to advancing democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, and the principles of equality and solidarity and can in the long term contribute to improved relations between the EU and its partner countries. Universities, and other general and vocational education institutions, youth organisations or young entrepreneurs' organisations, youth wings of trade unions and other youth focused organisations are key actors in promoting a global system for human rights and democracy. The Council also acknowledges that the EU and its Member States can learn a lot from youth-led organisations and their participation is key to the formulation of inclusive policy.
4. Acknowledges the outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and notably the structured youth engagement in the European Citizens' Panels.
5. Affirms its commitment to leave no one behind and to promote full, equal, effective and meaningful, inclusive and diverse youth participation and engagement without any form of discrimination, including on grounds of sex, race, ethnic or social origin, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, disability, age, sexual orientation and gender identity, or any other status. The Council commits to combating multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination to ensuring a human rights based approach and to tackling inequalities. Transformative approaches that address the root causes of gender inequality in policy-making and decision-making processes should be adopted to promote youth, especially young women's, full, equal, effective, and meaningful participation and empowerment.
6. Affirms its commitment to a human rights-based approach and gender equality guiding principles, as expressed in the new European Consensus on Development and the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024. In this regard, the European Commission has adopted an EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III 'An Ambitious Agenda for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in EU External Action' 2021-2025, which were welcomed in the Presidency Conclusions of 16 December 2020. In this context, the Council calls on the Commission to achieve the NDICI-Global Europe target whereby at least 85% of new actions implemented under that instrument should have gender equality as principle or significant objective and at least 5% of those actions should have gender equality and women's and girls' rights and empowerment as a principal objective.

7. Stresses that young people are powerful agents of change and innovation, including in mobilising action for climate solutions. The year 2022 marks the European Year of Youth, underlining the key role that young people play in jointly addressing global challenges, combatting poverty, tackling inequalities, building lasting peace and contributing to inclusive democratic governance, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and overall sustainable development in their communities in the EU Member States and worldwide.
8. Expresses deep concern that poverty, instability, fragility, conflicts, climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, natural and man-made disasters, water, food and energy insecurity, forced displacement, epidemics and pandemics and other health challenges exacerbate existing systemic inequalities and threatening hard-won human, economic and social development gains especially in least developed countries and small island developing states. Young people have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has compounded existing discrimination, in particular against women and girls and marginalised groups, in terms of access to and retention in education, employment opportunities, mobility, safety and physical and mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic proved yet again the importance of investing in health and human development, considering the disruption in the provision of sexual and reproductive healthcare services to young people, increasing unintended pregnancies, maternal mortality, child, early and forced marriages, undermining young people's rights and leading to an increase in the already high prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence.
9. Expresses its deep concern and commitment to act when the full, equal, effective and meaningful participation and empowerment of young people and the full recognition and protection of all human rights including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and especially access to basic social services and social protection, and access to information are threatened, questioned and circumscribed amid shrinking democratic and civic spaces. The Council also recognises the importance of strengthening the fight against hate speech, disinformation, misinformation and propaganda, while respecting the freedom of expression.

Engage

10. Calls on the Commission, the EEAS and the Member States to work together, in a Team Europe approach, to mainstream meaningful youth participation and engagement in international fora and at multilateral, regional, country and local level.
11. Calls on the Commission, the EEAS and Member States to meaningfully involve young people worldwide, in all the stages of policy making, programme cycles, initiatives and political dialogue related to the EU and its Member States' (Team Europe) external action. The Council recalls its commitment to support women's and youth's equal, full, effective and meaningful participation, in all their diversity, including in all spheres of public and political life, as per the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024. The EU should also ensure increased coordination and accountability on youth matters, including a strategic, inclusive and participatory dialogue with young people, children, youth and child-focused organisations across the world and endeavour to bring forward young peoples' aspirations and solutions and include youth perspectives on development. The actions of the EU and Member States should contribute to empowering and enabling young people to be able to take part in advancing the sustainable development, democracy, peace and climate action through funding and capacity building opportunities as for example through the Youth Empowerment Fund, the Africa-Europe Youth Academy and the Erasmus+ international dimension financed by external instruments while at the same time acknowledging the need to prevent brain drain.
12. Invites the Commission to allocate the necessary resources to strengthen institutional youth engagement through the Youth Sounding Board for EU International Partnerships, through the creation of similar youth advisory structures in EU Delegations, and through the network of youth focal points in EU Delegations.
13. Stresses the need for the protection of young activists and human rights defenders across the world, including women and girls, also in the digital environment. The Council reaffirms its commitment to promoting a safe and enabling environment for civil society organisations as actors in their own right and stresses the importance of the EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism.

14. Welcomes the Commission's action to strengthen an enabling environment for inclusive democratic participation and leadership by young people from diverse backgrounds, especially girls, in all aspects of public life, in particular the Youth and Women in Democracy Initiative.
15. Welcomes the integration of the UN Youth, Peace and Security agenda into the EU's political dialogues with partner countries and is determined to contribute to the implementation of that agenda. Stresses the importance for the EU and its Member States of supporting inclusive, meaningful and safe participation of young people in local, national and international mechanisms for the promotion of lasting peace and resolution of conflict, and to protect youth participating in peace actions.
16. Welcomes the review process for the EU's Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict, aimed at strengthening EU action to protect children affected by armed conflict, based on an inclusive consultation and lessons-learned process.

Empower

17. Reiterates the commitment to allocating at least 20% of the ODA funded under NDICI-Global Europe to social inclusion and human development. Welcomes the Commission's leadership in increasing education spending from 7% to at least 10% of the overall funding under NDICI - Global Europe for Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Asia and the Pacific, including through Global Gateway investments for 2021-2027, and welcomes the EU's key contribution of 10% of its humanitarian aid budget to education in emergencies. The EU and its Member States are to contribute to this support through funding, policy dialogue and technical assistance to ensure equitable access to non-discriminatory, inclusive, affordable and accessible and quality education, including technical and higher education for children and young people world-wide, especially girls and young women, including in emergencies and protracted crises, in line with the outcomes of the UN Transforming Education Summit and the UN Secretary General's Vision Statement.

18. Recognises the need to support youth in conflict affected regions, especially in the context of wars, conflicts and crises, such as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its substantial impact on Ukrainian youth, the violent repression of the peaceful protests in Iran, the suppression of civil society in Belarus and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, especially on women and girls and minorities. The utmost attention should be given to the protection of schools, teachers and learners against attacks and to providing for the educational, health, social and cultural needs of young people in conflict areas and in places of refuge, both in the EU and its partner countries.
19. Considers that youth empowerment, and in particular the empowerment of young women and of young people with fewer opportunities, and/or living in disadvantaged contexts, is inextricably linked to having foundational and transferable skills, to the transition from school to work, creating equal access to decent work and productive employment, including opportunities for formal self-employment and entrepreneurship, as well as ensuring equal pay for equal work, and therefore welcomes the Commission's action to implement a Team Europe initiative on opportunity-driven skills and vocational education training in Africa and to support the adoption of the Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans and similar activation schemes in EU neighbouring countries.
20. Acknowledges that vocational education and training (VET), and the acquisition and validation of knowledge and skills, including digital and transferable skills, are key to both supporting the creation of jobs and businesses and empowering young people, particularly women and girls, to ensure they can enjoy a life of dignity, be fully engaged in society as responsible members of society, and contribute to the social, economic and environmental well-being of their communities. Non-formal education also plays a significant role in empowering young people and supporting their economic, social and political participation. It is critical to integrate a gender perspective in this regard and to bridge the digital gender divide.

21. Underlines the importance of approaching young people's health holistically, supporting global efforts towards universal health coverage and digital health, addressing youth mental health issues and an integrated and youth-responsive approach to health and strengthening health systems and services as well as educational policies. The EU remains committed to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the outcomes of their review conferences and remains committed to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), in this context. Having that in mind, the EU reaffirms its commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over, and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. The EU further stresses the need for universal access to quality and affordable comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and health-care services.

Connect

22. Emphasises the importance of supporting inclusive mobility of young people worldwide (through the Erasmus+, international dimension financed by external instruments, the new European Solidarity Corps, Talent Partnerships, mobility for volunteering purposes and others), respecting national competences, and of supporting the creation of a strong EU Alumni global network.
23. Underlines that the promotion of young people's and children's participation in global citizenship education, including human rights education and training, as promoted by the Development Education and Awareness Raising Programme (DEAR), Education for Sustainable Development and World Programme for Human Rights Education, is indispensable to achieving a more inclusive, equal and sustainable EU and world.

24. Invites the Commission and the EEAS together with Member States, in a Team Europe approach, to monitor progress using existing monitoring and evaluating tools, to report to the Council, and to enhance efforts to collect age- and sex-disaggregated data. This includes promoting transformative approaches that address the root causes of gender inequality along with evidence-based youth policies worldwide in order to increase transparency and accountability. The Council further calls on the Commission to develop the monitoring framework in a timely manner and in close collaboration with youth and to incorporate YAP commitments and priorities in the development of programmes at country level as well as in the upcoming mid-term review of the NDICI-Global Europe instrument. Lessons learned from the monitoring will be important with a view of the future EU funding instruments for external action after 2027.
