Young People in a Post-COVID World

Recommendations for Policy & Practice across Europe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in communities across Europe. This briefing details how young people living in the UK, Portugal, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Lithuania and Hungary have been adversely affected by the global crisis. Produced as part of the CONTINUE project, this briefing draws upon lived experiences, qualitative interviews, applied pilot activities and knowledge exchanges to provide its recommendations on how such negative impacts can be counteracted during the recovery from the pandemic.

CORE RECOMMENDATIONS
The core recommendations in this briefing focus on the EU Youth Goals of:

- Space and Participation for All
- Inclusive Socieities
- Mental Health & Wellbeing
- Quality Learning
- Quality Employment for All

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities across communities in Europe. This briefing details specifically how young people have been adversely affected by the global crisis. Young people in Europe are experiencing challenges with their health and wellbeing, disengagement with education, barriers to their careers, and are being further disadvantaged by pre-existing issues such as poverty and disability due to lack of support. Young people's voices (particularly those facing varying degrees of marginalisation) are not regularly present in the political or decision-making sphere on a European level. Working alongside young people to co-create relevant policy and practice is one way to address this.

The evidence that has contributed to this briefing includes lived experiences of young people, interviews with policy- and decision-makers, learnings from the application of social actions, and a knowledge exchange session attended by a range of pan-European actors and stakeholders. This briefing presents specific recommendations for policy and practice intended to have long-term positive effects on young people and are mapped to the Youth Goals that currently inform the EU's Youth Strategy.

There are 11 Youth Goals altogether:
- Connecting EU with Youth
- Equality of All Genders
- Inclusive Societies
- Information & Constructive Dialogue
- Mental Health & Wellbeing
- Moving Rural Youth Forward
- Quality Employment for All
- Quality Learning
- Space and Participation for All

- Sustainable Green Europe
- Youth Organisations & European Programmes

The recommendations in this briefing do not address each and every one of the Goals, but are broadly mapped to a range of them, demonstrating their alignment to the EU's existing aims regarding young people, while specifically supporting Europe's youth in a post-COVID environment.

Key impacts of COVID-19 on young people in Europe

- Mental health and wellbeing – high levels of anxiety, poor mental health, decline in physical health;
- Education and careers – disengagement with education, damaged career prospects;
- Social issues and inequalities – exacerbation and amplification of existing inequalities (e.g. poverty and disability) and social issues.

Key learnings from CONTINUE

In order to address the these issues:
- Young people need a place at the table at a European and local level to co-create what the 'new normal' should look like for them;
- Co-creation opportunities are needed to make societies (local, national and international) more equitable, particularly for those in marginalised communities;
- Support is needed for young people who have fallen behind, and support for schools, educators and youth workers to provide opportunity and early intervention;
- Easier access to mental health support, safe spaces and funding is vital to reach all young people;
- Young people need more support in developing their careers to give access to a full range of opportunity.

Policy & practice recommendations

1. Safe spaces for European youth

In line with the goal of Space and Participation for All, there is a need for safe spaces for young people at the European level as well as the local. Our recommendation is for the allocation of funding towards the creation of these spaces which would be arenas in which young people can:

1. Discover and access support services, financial aid, and youth programmes;
2. Engage in dialogue with decision-makers in order to make their voices heard;
3. Meet like-minded young people.

While these safe spaces would provide local-level engagement, they would also be conduits for European-level dialogue with youth and provide opportunity. They could be created within existing organisations (e.g. youth centers, schools, etc.) to expand their offering, or could be newly formed in areas where there is a lack of provision.

2. A focus on inclusion

The pandemic highlighted issues with inclusion. To promote Inclusive Societies, we recommend social action training is made accessible to all young people. This could be through the inclusion of social action training in school curriculums, or making it accessible through youth progammes, especially those working with marginalised youth.

Social action training would allow young people to shape the inclusive society they wish to live in, while also engaging them in local decision- and policy-making.

3. Peer-led mental health services

In line with the Mental Health & Wellbeing goal, we recommend that access to mental health services is improved dramatically. Our recommendation is the introduction of a peer-led mental health service available in schools, colleges or other youth services across Europe. This would see young people trained to provide mental health first aid, and signpost their peers towards relevant support. The goal would be to provide more immediate support while reducing waiting times for formalised mental health services.

This could be piloted in selected localities before being rolled out across the continent.

4. Education and employability

Focusing on the goals of Quality Learning and Quality Employment for All, we recommend an overhaul of careers guidance within education systems. This would include:

- A European outlook on careers guidance - not just local or national;
- Careers advisers and/or employability mentors posted within schools, colleges and universities, integrating relevant careers training into education;
- Practical, real-world work experience for young people, with the option to work across Europe;
- Regular online and offline careers events in order to engage marginalised and rural youth;
- Entrepreneurship training within schools.

The aim of this would be to engage young people in their own futures and take responsibility for their own employability.

METHOD

This policy and practice briefing has been produced as part of the CONTINUE project. It uses:

- Data from young people's stories gathered using Community Reporter methodology, which facilitates people sharing lived experience in order to create social change;
- Information gathered during interviews with stakeholders from across Europe.
- Information gathered from young people and youth workers during the social action co-creation process;
- Information shared during Conversation of Change events and Knowledge Exchanges, both local and pan-European. These were held with young people, youth workers, and policy- and decision-makers.

At each stage, this data has been synthesised into reports which have informed the next stages. These have, ultimately, been synthesised to inform these policy and practice recommendations.

ABOUT CONTINUE

CONTINUE supports young people experiencing social exclusion to tackle the specific challenges of post-COVID times in terms of staying connected and integrated into European communities. The project is being delivered by a consortium of 8 NGOs from different European countries who are experienced in youth education and community-based activities. The work involves storytelling, social action projects, policy development, knowledge exchanges, an outreach campaign and the creation of an online platform. It is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

Find out more by scanning the QR code.