



YOUTH ACTION PLAN IN EU EXTERNAL ACTION

PLAN INTERNATIONAL SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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About Plan International EU

The Plan International EU Office advances children's rights and equality for girls in the EU external action. The office works to influence EU external policies and programmes, through an integrated approach to advocacy, communications and funding, and based on voices of girls and young women themselves.

Contact

For any questions, please contact the Plan International EU Office:

Johanna Caminati, Policy and Advocacy Officer, Johanna.Caminati@plan-international.org

Petros Kremonas, Communications Coordinator, petros.kremonas@plan-international.org

Introduction

On 4 October, the European Union (EU) launched its first ever Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU external action 2022-2027, aiming to promote meaningful youth participation and empowerment in EU external action for sustainable development, equality and peace. The file was one of the key deliverables of the European Year of Youth, which comes to an end in December 2022. The document is the result of consultation with over 220 stakeholders across the world, including youth and children's rights organisations. Plan International has also provided its input. In addition, on 28 November, European Member States approved Council Conclusions on the Youth Action Plan, expressing a strong support for its mandate and proposed actions, and committing to the objective of increasing meaningful and active youth participation and youth empowerment in EU external action.

Plan International is positively impressed by the YAP content and hereby shares a short analysis.

Firstly, an acknowledgment of the urgency of such efforts, even more so as the YAP puts special focus on girls and young women. According to [Equal Power Now](#), a recent Plan International report with data from almost 29,000 girls and young women aged 15-24 from 29 countries, 97% of respondents thought participating in politics was important, with 63% being involved in some form of group or organisation. At the same time, only 30% of respondents replied that they believe their political leaders understand the views of girls and young women, and only 31% believe the former act in the best interest of the latter. Only about 50% of girls and young women believe that, in their communities' view, it was acceptable for girls and young women to engage in political activities.

As mentioned in the YAP, with 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 to 24, and close to 90% of them in low and middle-income countries, this is the right moment to do everything in our power to provide an enabling environment for young people to be the powerful agents of change they are within the EU external action and beyond.

Summary and analysis

Plan International is happy to see the acknowledgement of a basic social justice issue: young people and children bear the brunt of crises and instability caused by armed conflicts, rising inequalities, climate change and environmental degradation. This is particularly true for girls and young women. Due to this, the challenges young people and children face are significant and all-encompassing: from lack of access to education to decent jobs, healthcare and social protection, shrinking democratic and civic spaces, to mention just a few. It is therefore much welcome that the aspect of intergenerational equity and justice is mentioned. The Council conclusions put emphasis on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially on women, girls and historically marginalised groups and highlight how the pandemic proved the importance of investing in health and human development.

In terms of scope, the YAP focuses on the transition from childhood to adulthood and defines youth from 0-30 years old. It also claims to promote and nurture a culture of meaningful participation in the early years and create space for children, with focus on adolescents.

Throughout the document, however, we find the breadth of such target challenging when it comes to assessing the impact of these initiatives. Children and youth might have overlapping needs but it is important to apply a life cycle approach to establish distinct and specific efforts in response to age-specific needs.

From a policy coherence perspective, the YAP gets a high score. In fact, it considers the many synergies and complementarities with already existing policy frameworks. It claims to:

- Strengthen the international dimension of the EU Youth Strategy;
- Build on the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child;
- Draw on the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the European Pillar of Social Rights;
- Implement the EU Gender Action Plan III, emphasising the empowerment of girls and young women;
- Support the implementation of the UN Youth, Peace and Security Agenda;
- All of this, while promoting a Team Europe approach in its implementation.

Four principles guide the EU in its strategic partnership with young people:

1. **Human rights-based approach and gender equality:** participation of young people and children is promoted as a right and addressing inequalities and structural barriers, mainstreaming gender equality and non-discrimination, and applying an intersectional approach. It is promising to see that the Council is aligned with this position and encourages the adoption of transformative approaches. This principle is also in-line with other EU commitments, such as the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III). This is a key principle that Plan International supports, usually defining gender-transformative approach as *addressing the root causes of gender inequality and redistributing power by challenging the patriarchal power structures currently in place*. To go one step further in evaluating the impact of such approaches, Plan International has developed a [Gender Transformative Marker](#).
2. **A participatory approach for transformative change:** young people will be involved at country, regional and global level throughout the external EU policy and programme cycles in an effort to contribute to youth ownership and to sustainability of the actions. For the YAP to live up to its ambitions, ownership and active participation from young people will be key. Given the ways in which the EU currently works and is structured, this represents a principle with many challenges when it comes to implementation in the different realities of EU external action.
3. **Youth inclusion:** the participation of young people will be promoted by specific actions targeting youth and by mainstreaming their perspectives and needs in programming, policy and political dialogues across all areas. This principle defines the core and the credibility of the YAP. Without youth inclusion, it will be hard to claim the YAP has lived up to its ambition.
4. **Evidence-based policy-making and accountability:** the YAP aims to increase the availability and quality of data on youth, focusing on young people between 15 and 29 years. The EU monitoring and evaluation framework of the external action will be strengthened by integrating more age-disaggregated data, adopting youth-specific indicators and promoting youth-oriented and -led research. As the EU steps up its ambitions on youth, the way such ambitions translate into action need to be closely monitored and the EU needs to be accountable to young people. That won't be possible without data and evidence.

Youth Action Plan pillars

The priorities of the YAP are categorised in three pillars. Please note that this analysis doesn't go into detail on all the announced initiatives, especially given that some are still lacking details, but focuses mainly on those that are aligned with the work and priorities of Plan International.

1. Partnership to ENGAGE

This pillar looks at how to ensure a meaningful, inclusive and effective youth participation. In particular, it looks at the importance of a conducive environment and the creation of safe youth and child-friendly spaces and opportunities, for young people from different backgrounds. Increasing the voice and leadership of young people, in particular young women and girls, youth activists and organisations, at all levels of governance, from domestic politics to multilateral forums, and within EU processes. It is further divided into:

1.1 Meaningful youth engagement in EU external action

The announced actions for EU institutional youth engagement are promising: from the new element on the Policy Forum on Development for regular dialogue with youth organisations, to the mandatory consultations of youth organisations in the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI- Global Europe) programming process, and from engaging more young people in the country roadmaps for EU engagement with civil society, to more youth advisory structures in EU Delegations. For these efforts to be meaningful and to become sustainable, one key aspect is the knowledge and capacity of EU staff at headquarters and at delegation level. This is why Plan International would like to put extra emphasis on the importance of the announced enhancement of institutional capacity and expertise of EU staff on how to work with and for young people and on child protection. Plan International commends the effort to set up youth focal points in 80% of EU Delegations by 2024. The ambition and commitment of the YAP on paper cannot translate from vision to practice without ownership and support by EU staff. It is promising to see that the Council backs these actions and invites the Commission to allocate necessary resources to strengthen institutional youth engagement through these actions.

1.2 Improving youth engagement at regional and multilateral level

We welcome the commitments and announced initiatives for regional and multilateral decision-making spaces. Initiatives like the “EU@UN youth delegates programme” sound promising when it comes to enhanced and diverse representation of young people in multilateral fora. Plan International would like to emphasise the importance of creating links between those levels and local and national levels too, to make such engagements sustainable and meaningful. This can be done, for instance, by ensuring a connection with EU delegations in partner countries when engaging non-European youth. This ensures a longer-term engagement that allows young people to better understand the different levels of decision-making and visualise the direct impact of the policies they contribute to shape.

1.3 An enabling environment for young people’s civic and political participation

The issue of shrinking civic space affects children and young people globally. The EU does not operate in a vacuum and it bears significant weight as a norm setter in the international arena. That is why Plan International particularly appreciates YAP commitments related to dialogue with partner countries on issues about youth and child engagement and participation, especially girls, and to the inclusion of young people in political and policy dialogues with national authorities. We look forward to working hand in hand in partner countries to facilitate space for young people to voice their opinions on issues that matter to them. We welcome the upcoming launch of **The Youth and Women in Democracy Initiative** to improve participation of youth and women in all aspects of public life through capacity building, networking, peer-learning and mentoring. We especially welcome the focus on grassroots organisations. It is also positive to read that the EU human rights defenders (HRD) mechanism will address specific threats faced by young HRDs. We often find ourselves raising

awareness in the EU space about the fact that many HRDs facing challenges are young and should receive specific support with additional safeguarding measures in mind. It is also welcome that the Council puts emphasis on the risks that young HRDs face in the digital environment.

1.4 Contributing to the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda

Young people are among the most affected by conflicts and crises around the world. We therefore welcome the fact that the EU is supporting youth participation and leadership in peacebuilding, acknowledging the positive role that young people can play in re-establishing peace and security. The increase of support for young women and girls in fragile and conflict-affected countries is also an important acknowledgement of their heightened vulnerabilities in times of crises.

2. Partnership to EMPOWER

This section looks at what empowerment looks like: when young people's voices are being heard and inequalities affecting their lives are tackled.

2.1 Transforming education

In no uncertain terms, Plan International considers quality inclusive education and lifelong learning basic human rights and enablers of equality, active citizenship and sustainable livelihoods. Still, too many children and young people are deprived of this right, especially girls and young women. As Plan International knows that education has [massive transformational power](#), we promote quality, inclusive gender transformative education. We are happy that the EU continues to be an ally in working to reverse the learning crisis and promoting equitable access to free and quality education from primary to tertiary levels.

The funding announcements in the YAP are no news – 10% of the overall funding under Global Europe and 10% of humanitarian funding to education in emergencies. That being said, we are happy to read that the EU will continue to support education reforms in partner countries with focus on access, equity, quality, inclusion, governance, gender-transformative programmes and financing. We also welcome the specific focus on girls' education and support for comprehensive sexuality education for all young people, especially those that live in marginalised conditions due to their background and identities. The Council's alignment on this is significant, committing to contribute with funding, policy dialogue and technical assistance to ensure equitable access to non-discriminatory, inclusive, affordable and accessible and quality education. This includes technical and higher education for children and young people, especially girls and young women, also in emergencies and protracted crises.

The acknowledgement that education is also changing and that 21st century life and work skills also need to be promoted (civics, climate change, environment, media and cultural literacy), is welcome. Climate education has become particularly relevant alongside the basic skills of literacy and numeracy and so has transforming curricula content, curricula delivery and teacher training to support climate justice and pro-environmental behaviours.

2.2 Improving young people's access to economic opportunities

Young people's access to economic opportunities through decent jobs is a key component of empowerment and an important effort to limit brain drain. The announced actions, connected to youth friendly investment and business environments, and the decent work agenda, are therefore

welcome and so is the focus on young women. However, an active effort is needed to make the announced actions accessible especially to young people in conditions of vulnerability and exclusion.

It was positive to read that the Council also acknowledges that vocational education and training (VET), and the acquisition of knowledge and skills, including digital and transferable skills, are key for both the creation of jobs and businesses. We particularly welcome the mention of the gender perspective to bridge the digital gender divide that is a significant challenge for gender equality.

2.3 Strengthening young people's capacity to contribute to sustainable development and drive the green and digital transitions

This section does well in acknowledging that young people are leading the way on solutions to the global challenges we are facing, such as climate change or increasingly digitalised societies. For this, we are happy to see again special mention of girls and young women and the importance of their views in matters such as climate mitigation and adaptation. Their meaningful and intentional inclusion is the only way to ensure that solutions are gender-transformative.

It is very positive to see that the YAP shows a clear understanding that youth need economic resources that are accessible to all, and especially to those that need them the most. The mention of grassroots organisations is very important – the YAP must work for smaller or unregistered networks with very limited resources as well. That's why we were particularly intrigued to read about the Youth Empowerment Fund, which we understand to work very much like the [Plan International Equality Accelerator](#) (designed by youth and supported by Plan International). In the same fashion, it is meant to provide youth-friendly, small-scale funding arrangements in a more flexible way while including young people in the governance of the programme.

The Equality Accelerator is a global community of young activists working for a better world where people can find funding opportunities, as well as tools for activism, advocacy, and campaigns. The Equality Accelerator is created by young activists supported by Plan International and is for everyone aged 14-24 who identifies as an activist or advocate.

Following the same logic, if the EU is to provide funding and capacity building for youth organisations through existing channels, such as the Thematic Programme for CSOs under the NDICI-Global Europe, there is a need to lessen the administrative and bureaucratic burdens for it to be truly accessible to young people.

2.4 Supporting health, mental and physical well-being and access to SRHR:

Given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus on health, including mental health, and on SRHR is timely and crucial. Equally crucial is the acknowledgement that health and well-being are a prerequisite for young people to realise their full potential. The Council's commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is very positive; equally positive is the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over, and decide freely on matters related to sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. In a time when forces are working to reverse hard-won rights and threaten to further restrain progress on the health and rights of girls and young women, the EU's commitment not to compromise on these rights is crucial.

3. Partnership to CONNECT

The third pillar of the YAP looks at creating connections. EU action aims to promote inclusive learning mobility and increasing learning opportunities, as well as foster exchanges for the professional and personal development of young people. The goal is to ensure diversity and inclusiveness while paying attention to social and economic barriers, the digital divide and risks related to disinformation.

3.1 Increasing opportunities for mobility in education, training and work

People privileged enough to live in a new country for studies or work know what an enriching and life changing opportunity this can be. We therefore welcome the different initiatives launched to support youth mobility, such as the Study in Europe Team Europe Initiative that will provide young people around the world with information about studies, research and scholarship opportunities in the EU. We know many young people still don't have access to opportunities due to mobility restraints and visa difficulties; we therefore stress how important it is for such structural challenges to be considered in the design of any activity, while we continue to push for inclusive and non-discriminatory mobility and migration agreements globally.

3.2 Promoting contact among young people

The EU wants to support the eagerness of young people to connect and exchange ideas through global citizen education, networking opportunities, cultural exchanges. This is welcome but a real effort needs to be put in place to go beyond the usual suspects, and encourage and support those that have not yet had the opportunity to connect internationally to do so. It is essential that hard to reach youth are prioritised and supported to meaningfully participate in these initiatives and exchanges.

We also applaud the ambition to increase the quality and relevance of information for young people and improve child- and youth-friendly communications. From an accessibility perspective, this is particularly relevant and can also support the EU to become a champion on this.

Monitoring and reporting

The European Commission, in cooperation with the European External Action Service, will monitor YAP progress at mid- and end-term through the regular reports on implementation of EU assistance and a final evaluation. The implementation reports will track change towards strengthening youth engagement in EU policy-making in external action and progress towards YAP objectives across thematic priorities. **A monitoring framework will be developed within the first year of implementation**, in cooperation with experts and youth partners, based on age-disaggregated data and youth-specific indicators, including gender. The YAP implementation will then be evaluated in time to feed into the next programming cycle.

We are glad the Council calls on the Commission to develop the monitoring framework in a timely manner and in close collaboration with youth. Moreover, YAP commitments should be reflected in programmes at country-level, as well as in the upcoming mid-term review of the NDICI Global Europe instrument.

This monitoring and reporting component is crucial to ensure youth participation is not understood simply in an extractive manner. When we ask for young people's input and partnerships, we need to be accountable to them, as well as transparent regarding successes and missed opportunities. Only this way we can build a truly meaningful partnership and envision participation in the right terms.

Funding

According to the European Commission, YAP implementation will be funded through existing instruments, meaning the geographic programmes of the NDICI- Global Europe, and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), including their contribution to Erasmus+ Programme. In addition, it is stated that the thematic programmes of NDICI-Global Europe (the Global Challenges, Civil Society Organisations, Human Rights and Democracy and Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention) “will also play a role”, and so will humanitarian funding. We look forward to learning more about this since the current available information remains insufficient. Dedicated amounts have been allocated to the three flagship initiatives previously mentioned:

1. The **Youth and Women in Democracy Initiative** (€40 million) will increase the voice and leadership of young people, youth activists and youth-led organisations worldwide, by strengthening their rights, empowerment, and participation in public and political affairs. The initiative will support grassroots organisations and young activists in the institutional oversight, anti-corruption, citizen election observation, democratic reform advocacy, civil education, promotion of the right to vote, freedom of association and assembly and human rights.
2. The **Youth Empowerment Fund** (€10 million) is a new pilot initiative to provide direct financial support to youth-led initiatives in partner countries focusing on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at local level, in particular on environment and climate change and the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised youth.
3. The **Africa-Europe Youth Academy** (€50 million) will channel financial support to formal and informal learning opportunities and exchanges for young people willing to improve their leadership skills and create networks of change-makers in Africa.

Final reflections and conclusion

Overall, the YAP is a very comprehensive plan with positive actions, and the team that worked on making it happen deserves our recognition for it. It is a solid and ambitious plan that shows that on a political level, there’s willingness to take a step further on meaningful youth inclusion in decisions.

The plan has some grey areas too. It was a missed opportunity to clarify once and for all the distinction between children and young people, as well as to dedicate more space to efforts to include harder to reach youth, or youth in conditions of vulnerability and exclusion. The plan also could have put more focus on digital spaces, that increasingly constitute a key part of children and young people’s lives: to access services, to receive education, to research information, to do activism.

Finally, one outstanding question mark is how much funding will be supporting these ambitions, aside from the funding announced under the three flagship initiatives. This is a crucial question since the YAP was launched after the completion of the more strategic component of the programming process. Only sufficient resources will ensure the right level of ambition can be achieved. With the support of member states and through Team Europe Initiative, we look forward to seeing how the EU will become a champion on youth engagement globally.

Plan International looks forward to seeing how the YAP is put into practice and what the monitoring framework will look like. We stand ready to support the EU in these efforts.

We really hope that the YAP eventually leads to all our institutions embedding meaningful youth engagement in their DNA and becoming less adult-centric. We often explain to decision-makers how to meaningfully practice youth engagement and what it should look like. We would be happy if this role of ours became obsolete simply because EU institutions are already there.