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NL- DK Non-Paper **A Youth-centred approach to European Union external action ¹**

This paper seeks to create a common understanding of how applying a youth-centred approach can result in better and more just external action and international development cooperation policies and programmes of the European Union and its Member States. The paper is meant to underline the importance of initiatives already taken by Member States and EU institutions and to facilitate discussion on how to further strengthen our efforts and take joint action in this area. A substantial discussion during the next FAC development would contribute to keeping momentum of from the youth in external action council conclusions of June 2020 as well as signalling that the topic remains high on the EU's agenda. Youth could already be part of the discussion on human development at the upcoming FAC by focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people as well as their importance for sustainable recovery from the pandemic. A focus on Africa would be particularly relevant

Background

Young people² in Africa have been disproportionately affected by the economic, social and political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, varying from severe education interruptions, to loss of income and employment opportunities. In general, the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 are hitting young people hard. Simultaneously, young people have contributed a great deal to COVID responses and are crucial for a successful COVID-19 recovery.³ Against this background, it is difficult to understand why young people are too often still excluded from decision-making on matters that directly affect their lives. It is now more important than ever to identify initiatives that can push for a positive recovery and create hope for the millions of young people in Africa who have experienced unprecedented hardship during the pandemic.

Meaningful Youth Participation (MYP⁴) is an important way to put the specific challenges and opportunities at the centre of our interventions. MYP is crucial for the following reasons. Firstly, it is a Human Right, as stipulated in, among others, the Convention of the Right of the Child. It is also prescribed under Sustainable Development Goal 16.7.⁵ Secondly, MYP contributes to ensuring the sustainability and impact of policies, projects and programmes and can help avoid discrimination and exclusion. And lastly, MYP contributes to intergenerational justice – making sure today's decisions are not only taken for their immediate effects, but for their future impact as well.

The importance of including young people in decision making as well as all steps of policy and programme design, implementation and monitoring has gained traction over the course of the past year, both at the level of Member States, as well as within the Commission. We commend INTPA for establishing a Youth Sounding Board and appointing a special youth advisor. In addition, we look forward to contributing to an ambitious Youth Action Plan 2022.

Call to action

We call on Member States and the Commission and EEAS to continue to strengthen Meaningful Youth Participation and endorse a youth-centred approach in EU external action and international development cooperation policies and programmes. This could manifest in the following ways:

¹ This paper is intended as a basis for reflection.

² The AU - African Youth Charter: youth or young people shall refer to every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years. Majority of the population in most African countries can be referred to as youth. This brings both challenges as well as opportunities in relation to the demographic dividend.

³ COVID-19_and_Youth.pdf (ohchr.org)

⁴ MYP implies that young people are well and timely informed; that feedback-loops allowing young people to hold us to account are put in place; that practical or financial obstacles for meaningful youth participation are mitigated as much as possible.

⁵ The voices and opinion of children and young people should receive 'due weight in accordance with age and maturity' (Art. 12 CRC). See also GENERAL COMMENT No. 12 (2009) on the right of the child to be heard.

1. Involvement of young people at all levels of decision making

Young people should have the opportunity to be actively involved in/concerning decisions, policies and programmes that affect their lives. This requires the creation of an enabling environment for meaningful participation of international youth in external action and international development cooperation policies and programmes. This implies:

- To ensure a significant and meaningful mandate for the Youth Sounding Board that is currently being established as well as to ensure the Youth Action Plan 2022 is crafted *with* young people;
- To involve young people in setting the priorities for NDICI programmes and TEIs as well as in crafting Multi-annual country plans at all levels.

2. Direct cooperation with young people as agents of change

Acknowledging the important role young people play in their societies, it is important to work with young people as leaders and partners, rather than as mere beneficiaries of EU programmes. This implies:

- To acknowledge the role of youth-led organisations and movements and removing social, financial, cultural or legal barriers to cooperate directly with youth-led organisations and movements, including in TEIs and NDICI programmes;
- To pro-actively seek dialogue with youth-led organisations and youth movements as structural partners of broader European Union diplomacy efforts & strategies on post-COVID recovery and other EU-Africa policy initiatives.
- To strengthen the cooperation with youth networks, organisations and movements at all levels, including in partner countries, on regional level and trans-continently
- To ensure an active role of youth-led organisations and youth movements in the next AU-EU summit, not only through the recurring youth summit but also when relevant in other parts of the preparations and at the summit itself.

3. Increased investment in core areas

The COVID pandemic has laid bare the importance of investing in core areas, such as for example education and employment for young people, especially for girls and women, and marginalized young people who are at risk of losing crucial windows for their personal development and wellbeing. This implies:

- To increase investments in education and employment opportunities, including in relevant soft and hard skills that allow smooth transfer to the labour market, accompanied by investments in job creation and entrepreneurship;
- To ensure the specific needs, challenges and opportunities of youth are integrated in TEIs and NDICI programmes and other programmes and funds that are part of EU external action.
- To increase initiatives in areas where young people play a crucial role, including youth, peace and security; climate and green transition as well as political and democratic participation.
- To ensure the right mix between the mainstreaming of youth, targeted initiatives as well as meaningfully including youth in our political dialogue with partners acknowledging the importance of intergenerational dialogue and a multi-stakeholder approach.

In all of the above, it is important to acknowledge that 'youth' is not a homogeneous group, and cannot be treated as such. Young people have a diverse range of ideas, needs, wants, challenges and opportunities. There can be multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Specific attention to diversity and inclusion is therefore paramount in involving young people in decision making as well as in cooperating with young people as agents of change.