

**UN Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law**  
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**EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM WRITTEN SUBMISSION**

**1. Creating an enabling environment for the effective participation of youth in public decision-making**

With decreasing participation rates in elections at all levels, decreasing membership in political parties in most established democracies, and less than 2% of parliamentarians globally under the age of 30, young people are increasingly marginalised in traditional political processes, and do not feel represented in the institutions of representative democracy; they therefore do not have access to the right to participation.

The European Youth Forum's own research on "Young people and Democratic Life in Europe"<sup>1</sup> offers in-depth research and analysis on the barriers young people face in accessing their right to participate, whether political, social, economic or legal/institutional (such as voting age). It also offers a number of recommendations towards addressing these barriers and improving young people's effective participation in public decision-making:

**A. Improving access to and provision of quality citizenship education**

The European Youth Forum strongly believes in education as a human right, and that all young people are entitled to quality education. Given the interdependent and interrelated nature of all human rights, fulfilling this right means contributing to the right to life with dignity and to the development of young people as autonomous, supportive, responsible and committed citizens. States are particularly responsible for the fulfilment of the right to education and should be held accountable for the education that young people have access to.

The Youth Forum believes that investing in quality education is a long-term return for society at large, both in economic as well as social and cultural terms. It contributes to higher lifelong earnings and more sustainable economic development while helping individuals make informed choices about their lives by providing young people with the necessary skills to be resourceful and pro-active citizens. **Quality citizenship education** plays a crucial role in the building of democratic, peaceful and inclusive societies by equipping learners with knowledge, skills, and understanding to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society as well as internalise democratic values, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law.

Our latest publication on "Youth organisations' contribution to citizenship education"<sup>2</sup> provides an overview of the European Youth Forum's understanding of what constitutes quality citizenship education, and gives recommendations towards improving its provision.

**The European Youth Forum calls for:**

- Governments to take the necessary steps and measures to invest in educational opportunities for young people, life-long and life-wide particularly under the context of

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<sup>1</sup> European Youth Forum, 2015. 'Young people and Democratic Life in Europe'. Available at: [http://www.youthup.eu/app/uploads/2015/11/YFJ\\_YoungPeopleAndDemocraticLifeInEurope\\_B1\\_web-9e4bd8be22.pdf](http://www.youthup.eu/app/uploads/2015/11/YFJ_YoungPeopleAndDemocraticLifeInEurope_B1_web-9e4bd8be22.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> European Youth Forum, 2016. "Inspiring! Youth Organisations' contribution to Citizenship Education". Available at: <http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2016/10/Youth-organisations-contribution-to-citizenship-education.pdf>

Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Access to education should be free and equal for all young people.

- Improving access to quality citizenship education, through funding for partnerships between formal and non-formal education providers, especially youth organisations. Citizenship education must aim to shape democratic citizens and provide every young person with all relevant information needed to take part in local, national and international political life as active citizens. It must be holistic, participatory and learner-centred.

## **B. Reducing the legal barriers young people face in political participation**

The right to vote is a fundamental democratic right, and a key element to participating in modern democracy. Denying this right to citizens requires exceptional justification. More than ever before, 16 year-olds possess the maturity and knowledge to make important decisions, as they already do regarding their education, living situation and career. After Austria lowered the voting age to 16 in 2007, research has consistently shown that under-18s are as willing and able to participate as their older peers. They follow the same voting patterns and are not excessively influenced by extremist parties or politicians. Paired with effective and quality citizenship education in schools, a lower voting age makes it much easier to instil a habit of voting in young people at an early age, boosting lifelong participation rates.

Aligning the minimum voting age with the minimum age of eligibility to run for office should facilitate greater participation by youth in representative political bodies. Unaligned age thresholds contribute to distrust between young people and politicians and to an alarmingly low descriptive representation of youth in the main representative bodies. Such legal barriers are also difficult to justify morally, as there is no reason for an individual to be excluded from the right to stand as a candidate and serve as a representative of the people when subject to the same range of duties as other citizens.

Imposing limitations on party and candidate spending has the potential of allowing younger candidates easier entry into the electoral arena and can lessen the obstacles facing new political actors that enter the world of institutional politics. Enforcing transparency in donations or provisions that limit and ban donations from private interests and public actors can also reduce the gap between youth and established political actors by limiting the influence of private vested interests on decision-making.

### **The European Youth Forum calls for:**

- Lowering the voting age to 16 in all elections.
- Aligning the voting age with the minimum age of eligibility to run for office.
- Improving transparency and considering limitations in the financing of political parties and campaigns.

## **2. From formal to transformative participation of youth**

Young people's lack of participation and representation in the traditional institutions of representative democracy creates an ever-growing gap between young people and political systems. Consequently, little priority is given to young people, policies targeting them, or the obstacles they face in accessing their human rights.

Drawing on research, the European Youth Forum's "YouthUP" campaign ([www.youthup.eu](http://www.youthup.eu)) promotes ideas to innovate and fix democracy so that it truly includes young people. Among these, the idea of citizens having more opportunities to participate and influence decision-making between elections, through participatory policy-making mechanisms, is explored. Such participatory structures offer the possibility to think beyond elections in terms of the

depth of our democratic systems, and to make better use of ICT to improve access, accountability, legitimacy, and ultimately the way policies and decisions are made.

Some examples exist at local level (such as participatory budgeting), national level (through youth councils) and regional level (including the co-management system in the Council of Europe or EU Structured Dialogue with youth).

**The European Youth Forum calls for:**

- Participatory policy-making to be explored and spread to all levels of public decision-making, including at national level and within the institutions and structures of the United Nations;
- Existing structures to be made more accessible and inclusive of young people from all backgrounds.

**3. Participation of youth in sustainable development and human rights protection in specific contexts**

Young people have been called “torch bearers” and “critical agents of change” in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, without youth participation in decision-making around sustainable development, and without the respect and protection of young people’s rights, they cannot properly fulfil that role and expectation.

The burden of responsibility for making the process of implementing the Agenda inclusive and participatory for youth rests on governments and institutions. **The European Youth Forum calls for:**

- Representative youth organisations to be provided with the space, support and resources to participate in decision-making, policy-making, budgeting, implementation, follow-up and review for sustainable development at all levels. Governments and institutions must also ensure that youth organisations have sufficient time and resources to consult with their constituencies.
- Institutionalised mechanisms for participation of civil society and stakeholders in decision-making around sustainable development, such as national or regional sustainable development councils or commissions, or equivalent bodies. A space for youth organisations must be guaranteed within such bodies.

In relation to the role of youth in peace-building, conflict prevention and the prevention of violent extremism, the European Youth Forum has set out what we believe to be the contribution of youth organisations and the youth sector in the prevention of violent extremism in the document “The Role of Youth Sector in Preventing Violent Extremism”<sup>3</sup>.

The European Youth Forum calls for:

- All sectors to work together to tackle the root causes of violent radicalisation, such as the marginalisation of young people.
- Sustainable funding for youth work and youth organisations to support them in reaching out to marginalised youth.
- Greater recognition of the key role of youth organisations and youth workers in contributing to intercultural dialogue, respect for diversity and democratic citizenship.

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<sup>3</sup> European Youth Forum, 2016. The Role of the Youth Sector in Preventing Violent Extremism. Available at: <http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2016/05/The-Role-of-the-Youth-Sector-in-Preventing-Violent-Extremism.pdf>

#### **4. Moving the global youth agenda forward: the role of youth in shaping the agenda of the United Nations and regional organisations**

Youth remain an often-overlooked group in the work of the UN human rights system. Human rights monitoring and review through the UN Treaty Bodies or the Universal Periodic Review rarely address recommendations targeting young people. The UN Human Rights Council and its Member States must step up their commitment to youth rights. At a panel discussion on youth and human rights held during the 33<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council in September 2016, **the European Youth Forum put forward the following five recommendations.**

##### **The European Youth Forum calls for:**

- A resolution calling for the preparation of a report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) mapping the obstacles young people face in accessing their rights and the gaps and strengths of the current human rights framework in addressing such obstacles.
- A resolution calling for OHCHR, in cooperation with youth-focused UN stakeholders, to develop guidelines directing states in implementing a rights-based approach to youth policies.
- The establishment of a special procedure on the human rights of young people, such as an Independent Expert or Special Rapporteur.
- A joint general comment or joint statement on youth from all Treaty Bodies.
- Mainstreaming youth rights in existing human rights mechanisms including the Universal Periodic Review and the work of the Treaty Bodies. In this context, Member States should involve youth-led organisations such as National Youth Councils in stakeholder consultations carried out during the preparation of national reports.

Recognising that the work and agenda of the UN is not limited to human rights, it is important to underline that youth does not currently have a sufficiently large role in shaping the agenda of the UN. Existing mechanisms, such as the UN youth delegate programme or the Major Group for Children and Youth, do not provide for sufficiently structured, representative, sustainable and meaningful engagement of youth in decision-making processes at the UN. Improved mechanisms for youth participation and possibilities for youth to shape the agenda of the UN are needed to ensure the development of policies and programmes that contribute to the protection and fulfilment of the rights of young people, and to consolidate greater accountability.

##### **The European Youth Forum calls for:**

- The development and introduction of mechanisms for permanent, structured youth participation in the work of the UN together with Member States and UN entities.
- Youth participation structures and mechanisms at UN level to involve youth-led organisations, particularly Regional Youth Platforms, as the democratic, legitimate and representative voices of young people.
- The UN to consider and learn from existing practices such as the co-management system of the Council of Europe<sup>4</sup> to involve young people in democratic co-decision procedures, where young people have the same rights and representation as other parties.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Coe\\_youth/co\\_management\\_en.asp](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Coe_youth/co_management_en.asp)