



**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

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**Listening to youth**

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Youth Conference, Opening ceremony

**11 September 2012, Nicosia**

Dear Minister, colleagues, youth delegates and friends,

It is a real pleasure for me to be here with you today to open the EU Youth Conference, here in my home country, and in this magnificent historical venue. I would like to thank the Cypriot Presidency, and in particular Minister Demosthenous, for inviting us here.

Over the next three days, we will conclude the third phase of the Structured Dialogue on youth participation. This is all about enabling young European citizens to have a say in shaping the policies that affect them.

By focusing on the question of youth participation, we are aiming to live up to the ambition set out in Art. 165 which calls on us to encourage the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe.

But our concern with this issue does not come to an end when this Conference closes – we are for example awaiting the conclusions of the study we launched last year on youth participation, undertaken by the London School of Economics. It will further guide us in improving youth policy at the European level.

Our dialogue with young people is growing stronger and taking on a more solid and permanent air. National Working Groups in all 27 Member States took part in the consultations which preceded this conference – bravo to all concerned.

And I am further encouraged by the significant increase in the number of international youth NGOs who participated in the consultations.

In Warsaw last September, there were three such NGOs involved; in Soroe in Denmark in March, there were five. But prior to today's conference here in Nicosia, 14 youth NGOs participated in the consultations. This is clear evidence of how the Structured Dialogue process is striking a chord with young people and their representative bodies.

The Commission welcomes the choice of the Cypriot Presidency to focus on the social inclusion of all young people, particularly young migrants. This reflects the priority afforded to Social Inclusion in the EU Youth Strategy. It will also ensure a smooth transition to the next trio Presidency, as we know that Ireland, Lithuania and Greece propose social inclusion as the priority for the next cycle.

But I think, even more fundamentally, we can all agree that this is the right issue at this time when economic downturn threatens to damage the lives of so many Europeans, none more so than our young Europeans who see their hopes and prospects for a good future called into question; and at a time when migrants are wrongly being made the scapegoats for all the concerns and anxieties that others are facing during the downturn.

The Commission only recently launched its Communication on the second EU Youth Report, summarising the results of the first work cycle of the EU Youth Strategy (2010-2012): it has now been passed to the Council with a view to being adopted, under Minister Demosthenous's Chairmanship, as a Joint Commission-Council Report in November.

The report presents a lot of new and revealing evidence on how young people have been affected by the crisis and I want to share some of this data as I think it is very relevant to the discussions here.

The report confirms that young people are the first and the most vulnerable victims of the economic crisis. The youth unemployment rate in the EU (age 15-24) has increased by more than half since the onset of the financial crisis, from 15 % in Feb 2008 to 22.6 % in June 2012 (I don't need to tell you that rates in some countries are much higher than this average).

Furthermore, among the young unemployed, more than 30 % have been without a job for more than one year.

Also in consequence of the recession, there has also been a noteworthy increase in "youth not in employment, education or training" - the so-called NEETs - since 2008.

NEETs are overrepresented in families with a low household income and high unemployment, suggesting that the impact of the current crisis may be to reinforce long-term intergeneration social exclusion and poverty.

The share of youth at risk of social exclusion and poverty is higher than that of the general population; from 2009, the risk-of-poverty rate among young people rose faster than for the general population.

Another, perhaps less dramatic tendency could be summarised as "more school, less work". Until 2009, the share of young people engaging in full-time education or in employment had been relatively stable for some years.

Since then, the share of students is going up while that of young employees is going down. Young people who lose their job return to education in higher numbers than before.

More education is clearly a good thing for young people; however this tendency does pose questions about the quality of education and training young people are getting; are they being well-prepared for the currently difficult and constantly changing world of work? Or are they simply marking time, taking refuge in classrooms and lecture halls while the crisis rages outside?

All of these factors result in young people's well-being coming more and more under pressure. Unemployment, impoverishment and family disruption significantly increase the risk of mental health problems such as depression, alcohol-use disorders and suicide. This can often have lifelong consequences.

The challenge for our dialogue is, at this time, a major and important one: it is to help identify what the promotion of Social Inclusion among young people really means in practice, what constitutes an inclusive society for all, one which enables the access of all young people, including young migrants, to education and training, employment and health, regardless of their economic status or ability, gender, sexual orientation, social or ethnic background.

And, furthermore, the challenge is to show how we can start creating such a society at this difficult time: when youth unemployment is reaching unprecedented levels; when public finances are being curtailed; and when so many in our Member States seem to want to turn their backs on collective European solutions and on solidarity with other social groups.

Thus the challenges that this generation of young people faces, as they seek to take their place as independent and autonomous adults, are daunting. Yet my message here today is not one of despair, rather it is a call to action to the young people here, and a clear statement that the policy makers of Europe will listen to what you have to say.

I want in particular to underline the message that we are ready to listen to you as never before. The EU Youth Strategy has helped to reinforce the focus on youth policies at national level during 2010-2012.

In addition, in spite of the crisis and the risk that it could increase despair and alienation, participation in youth organisations and social movements has remained high across Europe. And our own structured dialogue, as I noted earlier, continues to go from strength to strength.

If all of us here can do our utmost to ensure that this Structured Dialogue is more inclusive and available to all young people, and more representative of the broad mass of young people, then the moral and political force of the messages that you convey will be strengthened.

It would, in particular, be a mockery if the next cycle of Dialogue were to focus on social inclusion without the active involvement of young people directly affected by social exclusion.

Those already privileged to be part of the process must act as ambassadors of Structured Dialogue and encourage all young people to become involved.

Social Inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities is already one of the permanent priorities of the current Youth in Action programme.

It promotes active citizenship and non-formal learning and aims at increasing youth participation, developing solidarity and tolerance and promoting mutual understanding among young people.

It supported over 7 100 projects on Social Inclusion in 2010 and 2011, involving more than 150 000 young participants, of whom more than one third (more than 54 000) were youth with fewer opportunities.

The future programme for the period 2014-2020, Erasmus for All, will significantly increase the funds allocated for the development of knowledge and skills.

Erasmus for All will be an important instrument for contributing to the various elements of the EU Youth Strategy and for mobilising young people and providing opportunities for their active participation in society.

I am confident that the coming two years, when we will focus on Social Inclusion, will help raise awareness and trigger action to improve the situation of young people with fewer opportunities.

It goes without saying that we need to work together to face these major challenges and to find appropriate and satisfying solutions.

I am confident that in the coming days young people and policy-makers will produce constructive proposals in that respect which can be further reflected in the Council documents being prepared by the Cypriot Presidency.

Ladies and gentlemen and young delegates,

I wish you all a very successful conference and a constructive Structured Dialogue.

I look forward to receiving your joint recommendations, and I can assure you that the Commission will listen very carefully to your constructive ideas and ensure the appropriate follow-up.

Thank you all for your attention.