

Position Paper

Mainstreaming Young People in the Next Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-34

A message to policymakers – write youth into the programme architecture

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Executive Summary: Towards the Next MFF

In order to fulfil the principle of youth mainstreaming and address young people's whole lives in a comprehensive way - the EU needs to ensure that programmes beyond Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps and broader policy areas relevant to young peoples' lives are mobilised for the benefit of young Europeans and the youth organisations that support them.

The EU should therefore:

- 1. Establish a youth-focused policy architecture for future programmes;**
- 2. Ensure this architecture is accessible for youth organisations across Europe;**
- 3. Engage youth representatives in shaping the future MFF.**

Capitalising on best practices and learning from the missed opportunities in the current MFF framework, the next MFF should have a deliberate focus on youth, enshrined in programme texts — underpinned by a commitment to intergenerational fairness that safeguards the well-being of both today's youth and future generations.

Introduction

European youth faces a convergence of systemic crises – rising inequalities, democratic disillusionment, lack of affordable housing, deepening mental health concerns, gender disparities and the climate emergency - all these areas are challenges that Europe's youth need to bear.

By mainstreaming youth, the EU can ensure that barriers to independent living and social inclusion are effectively addressed. In turn, this enables young people—who make up 25% of the European population—to fully contribute to the democratic life of the Union. Youth should not be framed merely as a thematic area but recognized as an integral part of shaping Europe's future, one that is democratic and just.

An important facet of this picture is the landscape of youth representation. Youth organisations are not only spaces for democratic self-organisation, but also key partners in the implementation and delivery of programmes that affect young people. They can help design meaningful and inclusive initiatives, and play a crucial role in reaching more young people by activating their networks across local, national, and European levels.

Furthermore - this involvement and benefit should not be restricted to youth organisations from within the EU. With the devastating impact of the withdrawal of USAID on youth organisations in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries - it is even more important for the EU to consider how current and future programmes and policy interventions can be mobilised in these regions¹.

Gaps in the current MFF legislative programme framework

There is a substantial gap between the policy areas relevant to youth and the political prioritisation of young people in the legislative texts of the EU programmes set up to deliver these policy priorities.

Youth-relevant policy areas	EU funding programmes focusing on youth relevant areas										
	CERV	DEAR	DIGITAL	EU4Health	EMFAF	ESF+	Horizon Europe	ISF	Justice Programme	LIFE programme	IPA III
Health & wellbeing				⚠		✅	⚠				
Labour market & social security			⚠		⚠	✅					✅
Education - incl Non Formal Education	✅	✅				✅					✅
Social inclusion & integration	✅	✅				●			⚠		✅
Digital			⚠								⚠
Sustainability & climate change										⚠	⚠
Democracy, human rights, & Rule of Law	⚠						⚠	⚠			⚠

Key:



Youth relevant policy focus - mention of youth as a target group



Youth relevant policy focus - no mention of youth as a target group



Youth relevant policy focus - mention of youth as a target group in some policy areas - but other relevant policy areas do not target youth

While some annual work programmes did include youth-focused calls, this was not consistently politically mandated in the legislative texts of the corresponding programmes. As a result, the inclusion of youth in relevant work programme calls was neither universal nor comprehensive. When young people are not formally stated as a target group in the legal text, any youth-related action becomes incidental rather than intentional — present by chance, not by political design.

In the current MFF's programme architecture, despite their clear value as delivery partners of youth-relevant policy priorities, none of the youth-relevant programmes specifically target or set out supportive application conditions for youth organisations at legislative text level².

² DEAR and CERV Programmes however do emphasise at legislative text level the role and importance of European civil society more generally and set out CSO-friendly conditions for the programmes.

Addressing youth priorities in and building a youth-friendly architecture for the successor EU Funding Programmes

The EU institutions should explicitly include young people in the programme legislative texts, signalling that addressing youth policy priorities is a political imperative. The legislative texts for each of the programmes should also establish supportive conditions enabling youth organisations to contribute to the delivery of these priorities.

Recommendations:

- **Articles within the programmes' legislative texts covering the objectives, target audience and programme actions of youth-relevant programmes should include a focus on youth for all youth-relevant policy priorities and associated actions³;**
- All youth-relevant programmes should **collect age disaggregated data** to inform their evaluation and continuous improvement;
- **Youth organisations should be included as specific, named partners in legislative texts for youth-relevant programmes** - including citing youth organisations as a vital part of the European Civil Society sector;
- **Supportive conditions for youth organisations should be set out at legislative text level, including:**
 - The use of dedicated lower value grants in the direct award procedure targeted to youth organisations to take into consideration their capacity and size;
 - Streamlined application processes and procedures.
- **Indicators of how many youth organisations are to be reached through relevant programmes** or areas of programmes should be included in the legislative text to strengthen the focus;
- The **Civil Dialogue Group** established in the CERV legislative text **should be extended to all youth relevant programmes and include youth organisations.**

3 From July 2025, see future Annexes per programme for suggestions from the YFJ on where this focus could be written within the successor legislative texts, including a comparison with the 2021-7 texts, missed opportunities and rationale.

The Road to the Next MFF - Consulting with youth representatives

In the further spirit of youth mainstreaming - spaces upholding the principles of meaningful youth participation⁴ should be facilitated for youth representatives to be consulted on the future MFF.

Recommendations: To this end, national governments and the EU institutions should open up these engagement spaces for young people, including through the following mechanisms:

- **Committees within the European Parliament** that have been designated as the lead Committee for the different youth-relevant programmes should **organise dialogues with youth representatives** to help inform their positions for the interinstitutional negotiations;
- **The European Commission** should comprehensively and transparently **implement the EU Youth Check** to assess the impact of each of the successor programmes on young people, including through consulting youth organisations;
- **National governments** should **consult their National Youth Councils** when formulating their positions on the different EU programmes;
- **The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** should ensure that any Opinions taken forward on the successor programmes go through their EU Youth Test⁵;
- The **Committee of the Regions** should ensure that there are **youth representatives at any hearings** that are organised on the successor programmes.

Conclusion

The next MFF and the underpinning programme architecture present an important junction for legislators. Now is the opportunity to **politically mandate the focus on youth**.

With this seemingly small, yet powerful political signalling from the EU institutions - it can be ensured that young people are not an afterthought - but a core focus of the EU's policy programme architecture for 2028-2034, resulting in a fairer, more united future where all generations equally participate in democracy, and live together in peace and prosperity.

Collaboration Note: *A heartfelt thank you to People, Dialogue and Change - specifically lead researcher Cristina Bacalso, supported by Dr Dan Moxon and Corina Pîrvulescu - who researched and authored the resulting report "EU FUNDING MAPPING: Youth policy as a priority outside of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps". This report has formed the basis of the European Youth Forum's Position Paper.*

Note: Once the programme texts for the youth-relevant successor programmes have been published by the European Commission - the European Youth Forum will produce annexes for each programme setting out in more detail the importance of a focus on youth and youth organisations and concrete textural suggestions on how these can be achieved during the negotiations.

⁴ European Youth Forum, [Policy Paper on Quality Youth Participation](#), November 2020

⁵ <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/initiatives/eu-youth-test-eesc>

Appendix - Detailed Programme overview based on “Bacalso & Moxon (2025), EU Funding Mapping Report, People, Dialogue and Change”

Main Findings⁶

- Four Programmes have an explicit link to youth-relevant policies and target youth;
- Three of these four Programmes have an explicit link to youth-relevant policies and target youth and have potential for an even larger focus on youth within some policy domains;
- Seven EU funding programmes have a focus on one or more youth relevant domain(s), but do not mention youth as a target group.

Youth relevant policy focus - mention of youth as a target group in some policy areas - but other relevant policy areas do not target youth

Programme	Policy Area(s)
CERV	Youth targeted within Social inclusion and integration; Education (non-formal) elements of the programme
DEAR	Youth targeted within Social inclusion and integration; Education (non-formal) elements of the programme
ESF+	Youth targeted within Social inclusion and integration; Education (non-formal); Health and wellbeing; Labour market elements of the programme
Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III)	Youth targeted within Social inclusion and integration; Education (non-formal); Labour market elements of the programme

Programmes that have an explicit link to youth-relevant policies and target youth and have potential for an even larger focus on youth within some policy domains

Programme	Policy Area(s)
CERV	The CERV programme has the objective “to promote citizens’ engagement and participation in the democratic life of the Union and exchanges between citizens of different Member States” (Art.2, Para. 2c), but this does not have a specific focus on young people as citizens.
ESF+	As well as addressing youth employment, the ESF+ also has additional policy areas within the “Social inclusion and integration” domain, that have large relevance for young people, but elements of ESF+ do not mention young people as specific targets. Namely, it says it has a focus on “disadvantaged groups” when fostering equal opportunities and non-discrimination (Art.4 Para.1h), promoting socio-economic integration of third-country nationals, including migrants (Art.4 Para.1i), and promoting socio-economic integration of marginalised communities, such as Roma people (Art.4 Para.1j), but none with a special focus on young people, or the differentiated experiences of members of these groups based on age.
Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III)	<p>IPA III aims to strengthen rule of law, democracy and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms, however, mostly focuses on institutional reforms to do this, and not the ways in which populations, such as young people, can play a role in fostering this (Art. 3, Para. 2a).</p> <p>Moreover, the youth relevant domains of “Sustainability and climate change” and “Digital” are covered by IPA III, with the aim “to reinforce environmental protection, to increase resilience to climate change, to accelerate the shift towards a low-carbon economy, to develop the digital economy” (Art. 3, Para. 2e). However, it makes no mention of how young people may also be key stakeholders in driving these transformations.</p>

Seven EU funding programmes have a focus on one or more youth relevant domain(s), but do not mention youth as a target group.

Programme	Relevant Policy Area for Youth	Suggested additional focus
Digital Europe Programme	Digital, Labour market	Digital Europe Programme aims to “support the development of advanced digital skills...in order to contribute to increasing Europe’s talent pool,” including by supporting on the job training and work placements for students (Art 7, Para 1c). However, this formulation, which focuses broadly on “students”, which can mean any person who is receiving training or attending an educational programme, and not necessarily a young person, makes invisible the specific interventions that would be required for young people who are just out of high school or university, and who may be in their first job opportunity. Therefore, it is unlikely that youth specifically would be targeted by this programme. The “Digital” domain is covered by this programme in its entirety but has no specific connection to the impact of the digital world specifically on young people.

Internal Security Fund	Democracy, human rights, and rule of law	The Internal Security Fund, under a list of actions that it covers, describes projects that aim to prevent and counter radicalisation (Annex IV Para 1), but youth is not mentioned explicitly as a potential target group for these initiatives.
Justice Programme	Democracy, human rights, and rule of law	The Justice Programme has an objective to “facilitate effective and non-discriminatory access to just for all” (Art. 3 Para 2c), which could include a specific focus on youth justice, but does not.
LIFE Programme	Sustainability and climate change	LIFE’s overall aim is to support the transition to a green economy; however, young people are not identified as a key stakeholder in achieving this, when looking at its objectives and programme description in the regulation. For example, one of its aims is for “capacity building and diffusion of knowledge, skills, innovative techniques, methods and solutions” relating to the transition to renewable energy (Preamble Para 9), however there is no mention of how young people may play an important part in this. In fact, its Objectives (Art. 3) primarily list technical and legal interventions, which do not have broader consideration of how specific populations of the public, like youth, could play a role in these.
EU4Health	Health and Wellbeing	For EU4Health, an objective is to “support health promotion and disease prevention, by reducing health inequities” and “fostering healthy lifestyles” (Art. 1 Para. A), and possible activities include “health promotion and disease prevention” (Annex I: Para. a) and promotion of “healthy life choices, to promote healthy diets and regular physical activity.” However, no mention is made in how young people could be specifically engaged in achieving this. Young people are emphasised in the preamble in relation to alcohol-related harm (Preamble Art. 22), however given that they are not stated as part of the objectives or programme descriptions, this is unlikely to translate to a funding priority.
European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund	Labour market	The European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund focuses on employability, skills and working conditions in the aquacultural sectors (Art. 2 Para. 5), which could likely benefit from a special targeted strategy for young people to enter this industry, but it leaves youth out.
Horizon Europe	Health and wellbeing; Democracy, human rights, and rule of law	In the “Democracy, human rights, and rule of law” domain, Horizon Europe has a “Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society” cluster, which focuses on “strengthening democratic values, including rule of law and fundamental rights” (Annex I: Para 2b). While this cluster identifies “migrants” as a target group, youth could also be included here as a target and multiplier.

Additional Takeaways

- Two EU funding programmes do not have an explicit focus on youth-relevant domain(s) yet are relevant for youth organisations as important stakeholders in delivery of these priorities⁷.

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Programme	Suggested additional focus
Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund	Civil society is mentioned as having a role in promoting integration measures for the social and economic inclusion of third-country nationals. Youth organisations and the youth sector should also be mentioned.
Creative Europe	The reference to youth as target is there, but there is a lack of reference to a young cultural sector nor to Youth CSO that frequently represent the first time people in many parts of Europe interact with a book club/cinema/other cultural activity. The next programme text should therefore include reference for the youth cultural sector as a key stakeholder.

⁷ Text in the table based on conclusions by the YFJ drawn from the findings of Bacalso & Moxon (2025), EU Funding Mapping Report, People, Dialogue and Change



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