



Statements and Positions

Arbeitsgemeinschaft für
Kinder- und Jugendhilfe

AGJ

Erasmus for all? EU programme for a stand-alone youth policy!

**Statement by the Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ on the
proposal by the European Commission for a regulation of the European
Parliament and of the Council establishing “ERASMUS FOR ALL”
The Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport
COM(2011) 788 final**

Under the Danish presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Council and the European Parliament are currently negotiating a programme package, the effects of which will unfold in the field of youth amongst others from 2014. On 23rd November 2011, the Commission presented a proposal for the fields of education, training, youth and sport. This combines the current programmes Lifelong Learning (Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus and Grundtvig), YOUTH IN ACTION and international cooperation programmes in the field of education (Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink and Cooperation with industrialised countries) creating one programme named “Erasmus for all”. However, the structuring of this draft programme is not oriented towards the areas of education, youth and sport, but towards three overarching thematic fields of action: learning mobility of individuals, cooperation for innovation and good practices and support for policy reform.

Within this statement, the Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ undertakes an assessment of this draft programme from a youth policy perspective. The AGJ has already clearly spelled out that it would have preferred a stand-alone youth programme with its own budget.¹ In agreement with the German Federal Government, the federal states and key players of civil society, the AGJ objected an integrated programme oriented towards education and labour market policies. It was argued that the funding goals of

The AGJ – founded in 1949 – is an alliance of approximately 100 German child and youth welfare organisations and institutions at federal level. Members are

- the youth organisations and youth councils,
- the social welfare organisations,
- specialized child welfare organisations,
- the federal-state administrations responsible for child and youth welfare,
- the working committee of the federal-state youth offices and
- institutions and organisations dealing with professionals and qualification.

For more information see www.agj.de. The AGJ is founding member of the European network Eurochild (www.eurochild.org).

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¹ For a New EU Budget with an Independent Youth Programme! Position paper of the Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ (6th/7th April 2011)

such a programme – regardless of the contractual tasks of the EU – would be limited to direct economic applicability, also that the clearly profiled youth area would be weakened and that central target groups would be excluded.

To meet the demands set out in the following is necessary for the preparation of a suitable funding instrument for the European cooperation in the field of youth, recognising the significance of non-formal and informal learning, promoting the European awareness of young people and ensuring the participation of disadvantaged and individually impaired young people.

Political objectives: social commitment, social inclusion and solidarity among young people

Promoting the enhancements of youth work and youth welfare at European and national level as well as cross-border cooperation should be one effect of the new programme. This requires to pursue both overarching aims of the EU youth strategy, namely creating more possibilities and more equal opportunities for all young people concerning education and employment as well as promoting the social commitment, social inclusion and solidarity among all young people.

However, the Commission's draft programme does not represent an adequate contribution to the fulfilment of the contractual tasks of the EU which include the involvement of young people in democratic life in Europe and thus contributing to the formation of European awareness and to the creation of an EU of citizens characterised by tolerance and variety.

As suggested by the Commission's accompanying texts, the youth field is about to be reduced to youth exchanges, voluntary service, partnerships, and training and networking of those active in youth work and youth organisations. This arouses fears for the youth democracy projects and youth initiatives which are developed and implemented by the young people themselves with great effects. Although at least youth initiatives are mentioned in the accompanying text, they could however be omitted if – as proposed by the Commission – only public and private “facilities” were eligible.

Youth Policy Profile: independent chapter, specific activities and budgets

Youth policy is a central element in the continuing process of European integration. Over the course of recent years, the EU has worked on its youth policy profile in terms of a holistic approach to the promotion of active citizenship, solidarity and democratic commitment of young people and to the support of their mobility and cross-border cooperation.²

Thus the EU youth programme has acted as a central instrument for the support of young people in terms of personality development and imparting of values. The current programme has been designed without a limitation to the goal of developing “human capital”.

Though, the promotion of education and training as intended by the Commission with the new programme is aimed very clearly at innovation, productivity and growth and at the proliferation of knowledge relevant to the employment market and corresponding skills sets. Therein the AGJ fears the youth policy in the EU to be weakened and the programme to be exploited for purposes of pure economic policy.

² Important milestones were the European Commission white paper “A new impetus for European youth” and the “Open Method of Coordination” (2001), the “European Youth Pact” (2005), and the BEPA paper “Investing in youth: an empowerment strategy” (2007). The Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2009/C 311/01) (2009) combined the aforementioned activities and transferred them into a holistic strategy for the period 2010 to 2018. Striving for the general goal of creating more possibilities and more equal opportunities for all young people concerning education and employment as well as promoting the social commitment, social inclusion and solidarity among all young people, the youth strategy defines the following fields of youth policy activities implemented by the EU and its member states: general and vocational education, employment and entrepreneurship, health and wellbeing, participation, voluntary activities, social inclusion, youth in the world, creativity and culture. Both special initiatives in the youth field and cross-sector methods should be promoted here. A new role for youth work is supposed to be a feature of this youth strategy; the priorities and instruments for implementation shall be determined by vote along with the current trio-presidencies and under the approval of the Council of the European Union. Referred to as youth policy instruments are the application of EU programmes (in particular YOUTH IN ACTION) and further EU funding, gain in knowledge and evidence-based youth policy, learning from each other, progress reports (within the framework of the EU Youth Report of the European Commission with the collaboration of the member states), dissemination of results, process tracking with the help of indicators from other political fields (e.g. education, work), and youth policy indicators that are to be developed, as well as consultations and the “Structured Dialogue” with young people and youth organisations.

In order to avoid this and to guarantee the sovereignty of European youth policy, a stand-alone youth programme, at least a stand-alone pillar with an own chapter in the legislative text is required.

From the point of view of the AGJ, there are no objections to the overarching fields of action proposed by the Commission (learning mobility of individuals, cooperation for innovation and good practices and support for policy reform). However, the youth field needs its own logic of measures and furthermore an appropriate expansion beyond mobility measures. A central element of youth work is young people coming together in a group, out of which both self-organised and externally stimulated educational processes and eventually further commitment in Europe arise. This should be considered in the overall design of the programme and be recognisable in the funding.

The “actions” of the current YOUTH IN ACTION programme form a suitable reference framework for the configuration of a programme pillar for the youth field (e.g. youth exchanges, youth initiatives, the European Voluntary Service, youth democracy projects, partnerships, training and networking of those active in youth work and youth organisations as well as meetings of young people and those responsible for youth policy).

Furthermore the youth pillar should include future topics of European youth policy already conceivable today. These are for example the role of young people in demographic development, the significance of e-democracy and e-participation as well as the intercultural aspects of youth work and youth organisations.

Finally, also the education pillar of the new programme should provide sector and target-group specific measures as for the fields of schooling, vocational training, higher education and adult education.

In order to avoid an undesirable rivalry between the areas of education, youth and sport (which in the worst case could lead to directly competing applications for support), consistently and appropriately budgeted specific aims and activities that are binding for the duration of the programme must be codified by the legislative text.

Power of decision and disposal of Council and Parliament, overall budget

Up to now (and only in accompanying texts), the Commission has provided for a minimum allocation in individual sectors to a total value of only 56 per cent of the overall budget. In the course of the programme period, the Commission wants to share a considerable power of decision and disposal concerning the remaining 44 per cent solely with the programme committee. In this way, "adaptations" regarding the allocation of means and the political priorities would have to be agreed by vote only by the programme committee. The Commission does not provide for a respective agreement of the Parliament.

In terms of transparency, reliability and the constitutional sovereignty of the Council and the European Parliament (and with the administrative tasks of the Commission in mind), from the AGJ's point of view a far higher share (at least 80 per cent) of the budget and the political priorities should be defined for the entire programme duration.

In addition, compared to the current resolution as legal basis of the youth programme, the regulation the Commission is striving for could create more freedom of action for the Commission towards the member states.

A possible loss of the established partnership between the member states and the Commission concerning the configuration and implementation of the programme in favour of a technocratic, nationally oriented implementation would be regrettable.

With regard to the overall budget of the programme, the AGJ welcomes the efforts of the Commission to raise this by a massive 70 per cent. However, caution must be exercised with regard to financial promises, which still lack the necessary basis (e.g. via redistribution or additional revenue of the EU).

Actual budget increases – other than proposed by the Commission – should be distributed to all sectors as comparable increments. Remaining funds should be distributed according to procedures set out in the legislative text.

Specialised political responsibility and expertise

The programme proposal makes major concessions to the principles of amalgamation, simplification and conditionality: According to the Commission, the new integrated programme shall increase efficiency, simplify applications for support, avoid unnecessary overlaps and reduce duplication and fragmentation. The AGJ welcomes this desire, insofar as not only the necessary expenditure but also the defined benefits are reasonably considered alongside efficiency criteria.³

However, fears are justified regarding a loss of significance of youth policy concerns, since the Commission's draft of the legislative text clearly prioritises the field of education and in particular higher education.

According to the perceptions of the Commission, the basic orientation of "Erasmus for all" towards education and employment market policies would result in a corresponding departmental authority. This would lead to decisions on the configuration and implementation of the programme being made by the education ministries of the member states (in many cases not responsible for youth policy) and a central funding instrument for international youth work becoming part of their administration. This would happen at the expense of responsible and competent youth policy and would endanger the required visibility of non-formal and informal learning, of youth policy and youth work.

Currently the programmes Lifelong Learning and YOUTH IN ACTION each have an own programme committee, in which representatives of the responsible ministries make decisions about priorities, budget planning and the further development of the programme and cultivate a specialised cross-border political exchange. This structure must be retained; politically competent and responsible bodies for youth policy are needed.

³ Evaluations at European and national level regularly confirm the enormous added value of a stand-alone EU youth programme as an explicit non-formal learning opportunity with positive effects on the socialisation of young people. (cf. Summary reports of different evaluations of the EU programme YOUTH IN ACTION, e.g. see German site <http://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/informationsangebote/publikationen/studien-jia>). Corresponding findings are provided not least by the public online consultation of the European Commission itself regarding the future European programme in the youth field in 2010.

A programme for all young people

Regarding the (at first glance welcome) objective of the Commission of reducing the administrative effort and generating cash for more participants, undesirable effects will be generated if “de-bureaucratisation” is at the expense of accessibility for all young people.

The AGJ points out that a programme anchored in youth policy should have measures available for all young people regardless of their social and cultural background, their formal educational context, their gender or possible disability. The involved right of young people to equal participation opportunities corresponds to the implementation of the youth programme within the supporting structures of youth work and youth welfare, because its quality services suit specific socio-pedagogical needs.

The draft legislative text gives little hint that this programme with “for all” in its name is supposed to reach disadvantaged and individually impaired young people too. Concepts and measures for the implementation of this concern – for example regarding the desired reduction of the school dropout rate – are lacking.

In this point the AGJ criticises not only the absence of consequences in the aspired content structure of the programme, but also the proposal of the Commission to generally simplify funding regulations in terms of flat rates. Lump sums too narrowly defined will not fulfil special requirements; this target group is at risk to be neglected. From the point of view of the AGJ, the status of disadvantaged and individually impaired young people in the programme must be raised – this requires both special project formats distal from the “Erasmus” mainstream and a reasonable increase in the overall programme budget so that the inclusion of new target groups is not at the expense of current funding objectives.

“Erasmus for all”?

The name “Erasmus for all”, with its clear connotation of the promotion of excellence and the mobility of higher education students, is in no way suitable for a programme that is to maintain the participation of young people outside of

the formal education system and, besides mobility measures, to promote projects of participation and active citizenship.

Furthermore, “Erasmus Youth Participation” as the proposed public relations title of the programme sector that is to promote non-formal learning of young people is a bluff package as long as no explicit promotion of youth participation is proposed (excepting measures for the “Structured Dialogue”).

The Commission’s projection of the desired rise of 30 per cent in participant numbers in the youth field may generate quite a publicity effect but must be scrutinised: The Commission takes as a data basis only the mobility measures and simply does not count the 25,000 young people who have annually taken part in youth initiatives and youth democracy projects. In fact, a rise in the field of youth mobility would be achieved but this is calculated by dispensing of the initiatives and democracy projects. If all participants in the youth field were considered in the data, the result would even be a reduction of approximately 50,000 participants in the programme period.

Decentralised and user-oriented administration

According to the Commission’s programme proposal, there should only be one national agency each per member state responsible for the administration of funding along universal guidelines for the fields of higher education, vocational education, adult education, schooling, youth activities and sport.

In Germany, with education and youth policies being subject to different ministries (as in many other EU member states), four existing agencies would have to be merged into one large institution. This would result in a loss of expertise, which would be increased even more by the dissolution of current European networks of specialist national agencies of the eligible countries.

The Commission’s thesis saying that administrative costs could be saved by amalgamating the agencies or even by creating umbrella structures is as yet unproven and does not seem realistic.

Furthermore, the national authorities then left responsible would be challenged by substituting discontinued EU funding as well as the infrastructure of the other authorities currently participating.

In addition, it is highly questionable whether the proposed programme will consider the special requirements of the heterogeneous youth welfare structures and their non-formal and informal learning settings. An important plus factor of the current EU youth programme is the broad variety of structures running projects, including for example youth groups, small projects, clubs, and associations as well as local authorities. It is particularly to be feared that the necessary services of specific consulting for (particularly disadvantaged) young people and (particularly small) structures will get lost.

The draft programme is also characterized by an unrealistic perspective insofar as it neglects the different requirements of support that are featured by public education structures with full-time administration (schools, vocational schools, universities) on the one hand and youth welfare structures without a corresponding administration apparatus on the other hand. A voluntary youth group leader at the age of 17 who wants to apply within an EU programme requires a different type of support than that offered by a “one stop shop” with a combined “front office”. The national agencies are more than institutions for financial administration: they provide specialist support by means of target-group-specific information, qualification and advice and thus enable the practical implementation of the EU youth programme.

The AGJ will continue to deal thoroughly with the future development of an EU programme in the youth field. In doing so, the particular benchmark will be the added value for young people, for the programme in practice and for policy making.

Management Board of the Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ
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