

Defend the futures of children and young people across Europe! Renew Europe through a youth and education policy agenda!

Position paper by the Child and Youth Welfare Association (AGJ)¹

Europe at a crossroads

Europe is at a crossroads – hardly a surprising statement given the severity of the crisis that has beset Europe since 2010. What is surprising, however, is that this insight has yet to have a sufficient impact on the decisions taken by politicians in Germany and Europe at large. Seven years after the commencement of the public debt, banking and economic crisis, the rapid political tailspin of the European project appears to be far from over. On the contrary: 2016, which brought us the Brexit referendum, marked a new low point. The Britons' decision to have their country leave the European Union is symptomatic of the dwindling capacity of the European project to create political unity, of the rise in populism and nationalism, and of the decline in EU citizens' willingness to embrace the EU. The European idea is in danger of becoming ever weaker. And yet: many political circles and large parts of civil society continue to respond with indifference and reserve to the developments in Europe and their (potential) consequences.

With this statement, the Child and Youth Welfare Association (AGJ) wishes to counteract this indifference and take an unequivocal stand for a strong, social Europe. Besides policymakers and administrators, civil society too has a major responsibility to bear for the continued existence and evolution of the European project. The German child and youth services community hence needs to take a much more forceful position in the European policy debate and to fight for the European idea if it wishes to prevent the futures of all children and young people, which are inextricably linked to Europe, from being put into serious jeopardy.

Defending Europe's achievements and values, renewing Europe

The European Union originated as a peace project; it subsequently became a guarantor for economic prosperity, a driver of social cohesion and progress and a defender of human rights. In times of high (youth) unemployment, growing poverty and rising fear of social

¹ The AGJ – founded in 1949 – is an alliance of approximately 100 German child and youth services organisations and institutions at the federal level. Members are the youth organisations and youth councils, social welfare organisations, specialised child services organisations, Laender administrations responsible for child and youth services, the working committee of the Laender youth offices, and institutions and organisations dealing with professionals and qualification. For more information, see www.agj.de.

exclusion in many parts of the population, the EU's historic achievements appear to be losing their appeal. The great success of the European integration project is increasingly being either taken for granted or undermined by social, cultural and political isolationism.

AGJ is convinced that

- the (renewed) disintegration of Europe – a possibility that until recently seemed entirely remote – must be stopped! We must engage in a determined revival of the values of the European project!
- we must drive ahead with a profound renewal of the European Union to create a social Europe! The European values of democracy, solidarity, tolerance, diversity, justice and peace as well as economic and social cohesion must form the foundation of a reshaped European project and of a hands-on political reform of the EU.

A youth and education policy agenda for a social Europe!

The AGJ considers it a priority to put more effort than ever into creating positive perspectives for children and young people across Europe. To this end, it is calling for a youth and education policy agenda that pursues the following priorities:

- Making Europe fairer (for children and young people)

A social Europe must take clear responsibility for putting in place a favourable environment within which young people can grow up successfully. The social rights of young people must be strengthened and a level playing field opened up for all children and adolescents. This urgently requires greater commitment and targeted political initiatives to combat child and youth poverty and its consequences, to reduce youth unemployment, improve access to education and training, and provide stronger support to those who are not in education, employment or training.

A social Europe needs a strong youth policy, too. Political action in Europe must take account of children's and young people's rights and clearly commit to a proactive form of policymaking that puts the spotlight on young people, their wellbeing, their participation in society and their autonomy. European cooperation in the youth field has so far emerged as a valuable initiative for sharpening the profile of and giving greater visibility to youth work and education, youth services and policy in Europe. Post-2018, too, we need a longer-term youth strategy that requires a more reliable framework. Understood as a sectoral policy, youth policy needs to be refocused more clearly on subject areas in which the European Union has a clear youth policy remit, notably cross-border mobility, active European citizenship and civic engagement in and for Europe, European youth work, diversity and the fight against group-based hostility, and engagement with current societal challenges. That said, youth policy in Europe also needs to be understood as a mainstream policy and as such needs greater visibility at all levels. For instance, the introduction of a "youth check" should be pursued at the EU level, too, to ensure that policy-makers give adequate consideration to the needs of young people.

➤ Making Europe more democratic and participatory

A social Europe needs the commitment of its citizens. Empowering young people to assume responsibility and make their voices heard in debates and decision-making processes in and about Europe must be made a fundamental principle of political action across the EU and its Member States. Promoting an active European polity with a strong European civil society is essential when preparing the ground for broad civic participation. This requires the systematic, structured involvement of civil society in shaping European politics in the form of a continuous civil dialogue as well as the development of political participation structures that allow for all levels, horizontal and vertical, to become involved. And it calls for programmes that underpin these structures, along with more space, opportunity and willingness to engage with and listen to each other.

Democracy and civic engagement cannot function without education and information. To this end, a joint plan of action for European citizenship education is required that promotes European learning, imparts information about Europe, and teaches about the many ways that citizens can help shape Europe.

The most extensive manifestation of a committed solidarity to and in Europe is currently the European Voluntary Service. The EVS must be transformed into the central pillar of the planned European Solidarity Corps, which will be open to all young people in Europe and incorporates the quality standards that are the result of two decades of European experience.

➤ Making Europe more inclusive, open and diverse

A social Europe must offer all children and adolescents opportunities and pathways to shaping their lives successfully. In a social Europe, it is unacceptable that the wellbeing of young people depends on the country of their birth. For this to happen, Europe's opportunities for education and participation for socially disadvantaged young people and those with specific needs must be improved, as do the opportunities and perspectives for young people who have fled or migrated to Europe. Existing and new promotion programmes in Europe must give greater consideration to the realities faced by disadvantaged young people, those with increased needs, and young refugees.

A social Europe must also provide its citizens a habitat that is based on the European values enshrined in the EU Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In this context, civic education and its vast range of formats play a particular role. As a source of human rights education, democracy education and civic learning, civic education makes a vital contribution to a tolerant and diverse European society and as such deserves special support. Political education must be mainstreamed in the entire child and youth services field as well as in the education system; for instance, it should figure more prominently in higher education. In addition, civic education institutions and organisations must be developed further.

➤ Bringing Europe alive

A social Europe must give its young people an opportunity to experience it in all its political, economic, cultural and social facets. We need to create a Europe that its young citizens, too, recognise as their own – a space which they feel is worth defending and whose values they

wish to protect. To this end, intense European learning opportunities across borders play a major role; indeed, they are a right to which all young people are entitled. The cross-border mobility of young people and professionals working in all areas of child and youth services must be promoted at the EU level by means of action plans, binding targets and, beyond 2020, by a more user-friendly Erasmus+ programme with a better funded Youth in Action programme area.

Yet Europe also needs effective initiatives at the national, regional and local level to help spread the European idea and strengthen European awareness and commitment. This requires European-themed youth policy concepts and plans at the regional and local level that help young people to genuinely experience Europe through cross-border mobility, but also in their day-to-day lives in their community. And last but not least, youth policy in Germany will always need a European character and European elements.

Child and youth services embraces a responsibility for Europe

The child and youth services community has a vested interest in the continued existence of the EU. After all, Europe stands for the values that the child and youth services community represents, too: democracy, tolerance and openness, and justice and social cohesion. Undermining this European code of values would also mean throwing into question the very values of child and youth services. In its capacity as a defender of children's rights, protector of minorities and advocate of a broad concept of education, child and youth services receives vital support from the EU, for instance in the shape of funding (e.g., through the European Social Fund and Erasmus+), legislation (e.g., the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights) and political impulses (e.g., initiatives in the field of youth and education policy cooperation). All of these are genuinely European assets that characterise the day-to-day work of the child and youth services community and whose existence is increasingly taken for granted. Yet the EU crisis has revealed that we take them for granted at our peril. Instead, we must continue to appreciate, defend and evolve them. To this end, it is vital that more awareness be raised within the child and youth services field itself.

A child and youth services community that is fully cognisant of Europe's relevance for its work will have to embrace responsibility for the European project much more confidently and proactively than before. This commitment to Europe can and should be understood as a move towards re-politicising social work. A child and youth services community with a political conscience must intervene in European policy debates and be vocal in its demands for a democratic, solidary, fair and open Europe. Child and youth services is a natural advocate of the many young Europeans who, in turn, must act as figureheads of a renewed European integration project.

Child and youth services has a clear social, educational, cultural and youth policy mission and has the instruments at its disposal to empower young people, in particular disadvantaged children and adolescents, to experience what it means to be European. The (renewed) vision of Europe should be more strongly reflected in its own fields of action with a view to Europeanising the social practices that it employs. This requires public-sector and independent organisations and child and youth services professionals to mainstream Europe

in their day-to-day work, to push European projects for young people higher up their agenda, and to actively promote the European character of their work and the professional community of which they are a part. Finally, this Europeanisation also requires them to build stronger cross-border networks and to stand up for groups, specifically in civil society, that are coming under increasing pressure in other European Member States.

In short: To bring Europe to life, to defend and to develop it further is by no means an abstract political task. It is the sum total of all European projects, initiatives and networks run by all stakeholders in society, including child and youth services. And it is the result of the experiences that (young) Europeans undergo on their home continent, to which child and youth services makes a significant contribution. The child and youth services community is hence called upon to rise to this double challenge: to mainstream Europe throughout both its own structures as well as in its work for the rights and well-being of young people. Now is the time to recognise and embrace this challenge!

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