

A Green Perspective on European Youth Policy

The green movement is certainly a young one – a movement that emerged in great part from young people unhappy with the ways the world had been historically ruled and which sought to offer a different approach towards our relationship with our planet and among us human beings. The Greens are inherently concerned with the wellbeing of future generations. In this respect, we give an example of this philosophy both by implementing a coherent Green youth policy internally in our parties, as well as by advocating it externally.

Young people are often seen as a problem for the society, and youth policy is conceived as a solution for this problem. European Greens strongly oppose this understanding of youth policy. Young people should not be regarded as a conflictive group, but as a collective that contributes essentially to the development of society provided that its specific needs are guaranteed.

Therefore, youth policy must create a common framework targeting equal rights and equal access to their rights for young people, as equal members of society like all other age groups. Furthermore, we advocate that a youth policy be designed from an intergenerational solidarity perspective, by taking into account the specific understanding of the needs of young people in a way that complements the needs of other age groups.

In order for youth policy to be efficient it needs to come from young people. It is essential that young people are listened to when youth policy is designed or when it is reformed. Therefore, we advocate for a participative development of youth policy. The general aim of a Green youth policy is to improve the living, learning and working conditions of young people and to increase the opportunities for their social participation. From this perspective, we will further focus on 7 aspects that should be at the core of any comprehensive youth policy: education, employment, access to health care services, housing, citizenship and representativity, mobility and leisure.

1. Education

Education should be state subsidised at all levels and universal - accessible to all people, regardless of gender, religious orientation, race, ethnicity, disabilities or age. The role of education should be to pursue the self-fulfilment of the individual and to develop her/his full potential. Already in primary education, curricula should include citizenship, political and environmental education, in order to prepare young people from an early age for full participation in society. We further demand that education should not be confessional.

Furthermore, school curricula should include sexuality education classes, focusing on sexual and reproductive health rights and respect to sexual minorities, to combat homophobic practices from an early age.

Already in primary education, the learning of languages should be encouraged. We stress the importance of cross-European education. All students should have the possibility and should be stimulated to travel around Europe and to study in different countries. Scholarships for cross-European education will be extended.

We are particularly concerned with the quality of education provided in public schools. The focus has to be on developing a highly qualitative educational system, which prepares the pupils for professional life and civil participation. This cannot be achieved without state investments in education, particularly in the proper remuneration and social recognition of

educators and in modern school facilities, such as computer labs, digital libraries etc. Access to culture and open knowledge through new technology should be a right available in schools and universities. Universal free internet access represents better than anything else putting it into practice.

We are further concerned with the rising numbers of school drop-outs, especially among sometimes marginalised categories, such as migrant youth. In this respect, we demand an educational system offering multiple re-entry points, so that re-engagement in education can be easily undertaken.

Because education starts already in the pre-school period, namely in kindergartens, pre-school education should be provided by the state for free in all European countries. By doing so, the state would ensure higher enrolment of children in pre-school education and give them equal opportunities, regardless of the financial situation of their parents, as well as enable young couples to start their own families when they want to and not just when they are financially able to.

We call for free higher education, with no tuition fees. Higher education has to be designed in such a way that it permits flexibility for students, in order for them to combine studying with work and/or civic participation. Higher education should be made accessible to all, by insuring zero interest loans for students, providing cheap and healthy food in canteens, as well as providing accessible housing for students coming from outside the university's city.

Moreover, university housing should be available and affordable for all young students and young teachers involved in university. This housing should offer students decent conditions of living, with all the required services. Fully equipped kitchens, laundry rooms and common spaces should always be part of university housing facilities, in order to guarantee at least the minimal comfort standards for the students. Free access to Internet in all student housing buildings should go without saying. If university housing would be widely available, students would have more time for their studies, as they would not be forced to undertake low quality and poorly paid jobs in order to pay their housing rent. Furthermore, universities and high schools should be obliged to offer childcare facilities both for young parents and for teachers, so that young families can continue studying while their children are taken care of.

Education should be understood in the broader concept of life-long and life-wide learning and should never be reduced to purely academic learning. At the higher level, the importance of university studies for the social development cannot hide the key role that vocational training plays in our education systems and our economies educating professionals with a high degree of expertise in specific areas of knowledge crucial for the functioning of our society.

Finally, non-formal education, such as that offered by volunteering in civil society organisations are integral parts of education and should be recognised both socially and in the curricula. Non-formal education provides a set of complementary skills and values crucial for life in society that are usually not provided by formal education, such as commitment, collective thinking, tolerance, sustainability and interpersonal skills.

As a general remark, education in itself should not only be regarded as a tool to get into the labour market, but rather as an element of intellectual and personal self-fulfilment.

2. Employment

Every young person should have the opportunity and choice to access the labour market. However, merely ensuring access to the labour market is not sufficient. The conditions of employment are crucial in order to provide stability and security for young people. Therefore, the current trend of a hard way into jobs and an easy way out should be reverted to an easy way in and hardening the dismissal procedures. Therefore, we should strive for strong legislation combating precariousness in the job market.

We call for specific measures to reduce precarity, which should include the establishment of a reasonable minimum wage in each European country. The way to set those minimum wages – law, collective labor agreements at various levels - must be decided by each country. This can be promoted by offering tax incentives, so that young people do not end up stuck in under-paid, short-term contracts that can only create social and economic insecurity by preventing them from developing their life project.

Furthermore, free legal assistance and advice should be offered in order to support young entrepreneurship, as well as loans in advantageous conditions.

Young people should have access to internship opportunities and training experiences with fair remuneration, allowing self economic sustainability during the traineeship period. Internships cannot by any means become substitutes for permanent job positions, and proper coaching must be provided according to the educational goals of the experience. All these should be further recognised by employers as genuine work experience activities.

We want to stress that the gender pay gap existent on the job market is maintained also for first jobs and entry-level jobs. We therefore strongly call for equal pay for equal jobs, regardless of the nature and level of the job.

We find it important that young people are able to reconcile studying, working and volunteering with private life and leisure activities. This is a prerequisite for enabling youth participation. We therefore advocate stricter time management policies, with adapted working hours, particularly for students.

3. Health

Health care should be guaranteed by the state, free of charge and with the same quality of medical treatment for all. Young people are often marginalised in accessing medical care due to the high costs of medical insurances and of medicines. In this respect, there is a huge need for school and university campus doctors, available free of charge and at any time (including school holidays) for students.

Apart from medical care, every educational institution should provide school counsellors trained in child or teenage psychology, who can respond to the specific problems of students, from career counselling to discussing personal issues. For young people not involved in the formal education system, such medical and psychological services should be provided through specific youth centres.

Sport is an important source of body fitness and physical well-being, which is proven to have positive effects on mental health as well. Beyond the personal benefits, healthier citizens also have positive effects on the health system and on the productive sector, both resulting in a positive effect on public finances. To promote healthy lifestyles from an early stage, every child has to be guaranteed physical education in the school curricula. This should not be limited to sport practice, but it should also focus on promoting food culture and giving information on healthy diets.

When targeting specifically youth issues related to health, we find Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights extremely important. Therefore access to sexuality education and counselling is crucial at an early stage in life, before sexual activity starts and once it has started, to avoid sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unwanted pregnancies. Testing on STDs should be readily available for free and family planning and advice centres should be accessible to all. From the same perspective contraceptive methods should be accessible for everyone and free for young people under 18. Women should have the right to decide over their own bodies and life. As a conclusion, we urge an end of the criminalization of consensual sexual relationships between equals, and the double standards of some traditional approaches, seeking to hide reality instead and thus contributing into propagating undesired consequences of it by not approaching the problem openly.

4. Housing

Housing is one of the main problems of European youth nowadays regardless of their socio-economic conditions. Low salaries combined with increased costs on basic products, concentration of population in the so-called global cities and real estate speculations create a fierce competition for decent living spaces. Unfortunately, young people are currently a vulnerable group in this area, with less chances to secure decent housing due to their lack of economic guarantees. This turns up too often in young people being excluded in the access to housing.

We believe that in order to emancipate themselves and be able to decide better on their future opportunities, students and young working adults should have guaranteed access to decent and cheap housing conditions, with special emphasis on young single mothers, young families, migrants and minorities at risk of segregation. Minimum standards on space, water and electricity, cooking and washing facilities, natural light and open air, thermic and acoustic isolation and free internet access are fundamental in ensuring living dignity.

However, in a context where prices of square meter of living facilities are extremely high – and growing in many cases-, and speculation is worsening the problem, it is only through public intervention that the situation can be reverted. Massive investments in public subsidized housing would contribute to the regulation of the market price towards lower, more affordable levels. Public housing should particularly target young people, which is, as aforementioned, one of the groups facing most constraints in accessing a flat for the first time. In this sense, renting should be prioritized in front of complete acquisition, as this kind of facilities should be understood as a solid platform from where young people can start developing their life project. Once enough social progress is achieved and employment stability allows for the possibility to seek for new housing opportunities on the private market, the existing public facility can be taken over by another young person trying to establish in the society. This relatively fast turnover would create a sort of inter- and intra-generational solidarity contributing to social cohesion.

These are policies that require years of investment. And still, public housing cannot cover all the market for young people. Hence, complementary policies for youth housing must be implemented. E.g. by setting special interest rates for loans or mortgages for young people.

Furthermore, measures that are less time and less resources consuming can be adopted. To begin with, the location of new housing facilities should be equally spread among the different urban districts, thus avoiding the creation of ghettos or marginalized areas. Another measure could be the promotion of facility-service exchange contracts; that is, offering the progressive internal rehabilitation and renewal of habitable ancient buildings or flats in exchange of the right to live there. This temporary agreement, which becomes a win-win situation for both parties, as it can be a solution meanwhile a longer term option is sought, and it ensures the internal maintenance of urban buildings. Finally, in the same line of service-facility exchange, intergenerational flat sharing could be promoted, with the benefits it can bring for all the people involved. On the one hand, elderly people living alone get a companion who can regularly overlook that there is not an accident or a major health problem, cooperating with social services. On the other hand, young people get their own independent space, with a responsible flatmate. This system, although it cannot be understood in any other way than a temporary arrangement, can represent a good means to reinforce intergenerational understanding and cooperation. As a last proposal, and as an ultimate safeguarding service, free public dormitories should be provided for homeless people.

5. Citizenship and representativity

Regarding the participation of young people in the social and political life, we strongly believe that they should have both the right and the possibility of participating in and influencing society-shaping decisions. Young people need to be included in the design and implementation of policies affecting them through efficient tools and through real and direct representation.

Government and policy makers should ensure the institutional representation of young people. The active citizenship of young people, both as a right and a duty, should be promoted by the institutions and not only by the civil society.

This requires promoting the idea that the democratic responsibilities in the society do not finish with voting every four or five years in elections. In this sense, we strongly believe that lowering the voting age to 16 would contribute to increasing the involvement of young people in politics at an earlier stage. However, in order for young people to be committed to the society and its development, there is a prerequisite: young people need to feel included into it. Social inclusion goes beyond the simple acceptance, as it further requires the recognition of the specific needs of the collective and acknowledging the contribution to the society and its future potential. It is all about participating in the present to build the society of the future.

However, the proportion of young people in decision making – like in universities, economic and social committees, etc. - is still small, falling in the category of under-representation. Therefore, the government and the policy makers should ensure the dialogue with young people: the active citizenship of young people, both as a right and a duty, should be promoted by the institutions and not only by the civil society. This means an institutional recognition and political cooperation with the genuine decision-making bodies of young people, which must become the main partner of politicians to make and implement legislation affecting youth. The establishment of Youth Parliaments and Youth Councils are the manifestation of the desire of young people active in organizations to get self-organized to speak with a single voice raising the demands of common interest for young people. At a European level, the creation of the European Youth Forum has become an important step. However, in general there is still a lack of resources and the influence on policies is still very limited.

The institutional representation of youth generally remarks itself by its absence, due to the enormous difficulty to reach an elected position. This obviously contributes to the trend of growing dis-involvement of youth and society in general in politics. Therefore, higher proportionality in the age of elected representatives, as well as in gender, should apply. Having young voices defending young people's points of view and interests within the political decision making bodies are always a guarantee that youth is taken into account. Therefore, we believe that the issue of quotas in the party lists can be a good tool towards this goal.

Finally, in order to achieve a satisfactory outcome of this empowerment it is important to provide citizenship education from an early stage. Understanding rights and duties as citizens, democratic principles, political systems, ideologies and parties as well as civil society forms of participation would educate fully conscious citizens, aware of their responsibility in a broader perspective. This is a cornerstone for young generation to develop their full potential as free citizens contributing to a better society.

6. Mobility

In a globalized world that is becoming more interrelated all the time, the exchange of cultures is crucial, not only for personal growth, but also for a better understanding and mutual development. The acknowledgment of this reality has generated a continuous flow of people; on the one hand an imbalanced one generated by great inequalities in the development of countries – South-North migrations - and on the other one a more balanced one between developed countries, for instance within the European Union. These movements of people can contribute to create a stronger unity in diversity, breaking down stereotypes and bridging the gaps in understanding generated by ignorance. Therefore, mobility appears fundamental here, not only as a civil right, but also as a source of personal development and positive evolution of society. The right to move freely, without administrative borders that prevent taking free decisions on where to go, is a significant personal liberty. Therefore, an update for visa regimes with cost-free, softened and speeded-up procedures, towards a visa-free Europe appears crucial for young people. It is important to note that, while freedom of mobility should be guaranteed for every person, this cannot be forced. For instance, the willingness to travel often is a pre-requisite for being employed. Being obliged to travel often undermines the chances of young people becoming active citizens locally.

At a local level, it is important to invest in green mobility that is both environmental friendly and accessible to young people. Yet proper conditions to promote a life-long mobility routine must be implemented. This can be achieved by creating for instance proper bike lanes systems to move effectively within the city, without dangerous exposure to cars and pollution. In this sense, public transport should make the final shift to ecological energy sources. Finally, subsidised public transport should be provided to young people –especially students-, and proper accessibility for disabled people must be ensured for any means of transportation. Traffic organization should give all the priority to collective transport, with specific lanes and traffic light and signalling priorities.

7. Leisure

Youth leisure finds itself trapped between different threats. On the one hand, the excessive influence of consumerist habits promoted by a globalized Western culture alienates people with a brief unreal feeling of satisfaction associated to the expenditure of money. The image of success associated to the possession of certain goods promoted by advertising creates a fake need for acquiring unnecessary products. This is dangerous both socio-economically and environmentally, since it does not only lead to over-expenditure that often leads to significant debt in individuals or families, but also environmentally, as it creates over-consumption of natural resources.

Moreover, this over-consumption goes hand in hand with the general situation of lack of acquisitive power of youth depicted above. This context reduces even further the chances of emancipation, as a great deal of the few available economic resources are spent in such practices instead of basic needs. Therefore, in many European countries a majority of young people becomes then non self-sustainable economically until a very late stage of life. And it has a big effect on the families' economy, as the consequences of this status are often supported by parents. Indeed, in some cases it is them financing this consumption. In other cases, they are still absorbing it in terms of overhead costs by having the children living in the parental home since they cannot afford to pay for their own accommodation. The clear consequence of this is a delay in emancipation and reduced personal independence.

We want to promote alternative leisure as it generates social cohesion and provides a source for non-formal education. That is, shifting from an individualist concept of free-time activities towards collective-oriented leisure culture can bring forward important advances in building an active citizenship. However, this does not only require investment in public facilities and increasing public granting resources, with a clear strategy of co-financing according to social targets. Furthermore, a re-designing of time policies is needed, as explained under the employment section.

Another dimension of leisure is that connected with the right to enjoy one's own body the way one decides, as long as it does not cause any harm or disturbance to others. Sexuality should no longer be a taboo and should be approached openly, especially in a context where not transmitting proper information or promoting wrong messages can entail risks to human health. Furthermore, this approach should be broad and include all forms of consensual sexuality, targeting especially a better social acceptance of homosexuality. Discrimination and repression against LGBTQ community must stop, as it is highly worrying that homophobic practices still persist in Europe in 21st century, the fact that some of them are promoted by governmental forces in some countries is particularly unacceptable.

The areas depicted above represent core elements of youth policy with concrete proposals that affect the actual wellbeing of young people and are crucial for enabling them to deploy their life project in the coming future. However, youth policy does not end up here, but it is rather the beginning. A true youth mainstreaming in policy making leading to an eventual emancipation and full inclusion in the society means considering youth perspective in every legislative proposal from every field. And the Greens in Europe are responsible to ensure it is happening. The future of the planet depends on that.