



## EVALUATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION

THEMATIC EVALUATION

# EVALUATION OF EU SUPPORT TO YOUTH IN THE ENLARGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD REGIONS

VOLUME I – MAIN REPORT

*July 2024*

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MATTERS

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# **Evaluation of EU support to Youth in the Enlargement and Neighbourhood regions (2014-2022)**

## **Volume I – Main Report**

The report consists of three volumes:

### **VOLUME I – MAIN REPORT**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Key methodological elements**
- 3. Evolution of EU support**
- 4. Main findings: Design and delivery of EU support**
- 5. Main findings: Effects of EU support in sectors of focus**
- 6. Overall assessment**
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- 1. Regional case study**
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## List of acronyms and abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DG	Directorate General
DG NEAR	Directorate General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EQ	Evaluation Question
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union Delegation
HQ	Headquarter
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Non-Binary, Intersex, and Queer
NDICI-GE	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UN	United Nations
VET	Vocational Education and Training

# Evaluation of EU support to youth

IN THE ENLARGEMENT  
AND NEIGHBOURHOOD REGIONS

## Executive Summary



## Introduction

This final report presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Evaluation of the European Union (EU) support to Youth in the Enlargement and Neighbourhood regions (2014-2022), commissioned by Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).

The evaluation served a *dual purpose* of accountability and learning. The main objectives were to:

- provide an independent and evidence-based assessment of the EU's past and current external action support to youth and, based on this assessment,
- provide lessons learnt and recommendations for decision-makers at EU level.

The *specific objectives* of the evaluation were:

- to assess in qualitative and quantitative terms the relevance, implementation conditions and performance of EU external action support to youth,

particularly its efficiency, effectiveness, coherence, sustainability, and impact.

- to assess the EU's cooperation potential and added value; and to identify lessons learnt, best practices, and recommendations regarding explanatory factors that hamper the contributions of EU support to youth, policy development, policy dialogue, and related coherence, as well as operational aspects in the field of youth.

The analysis covered both *spending* and *non-spending actions*. It examined all *funding mechanisms* and *modalities* of implementation used under the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) II and III, the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI-GE). The overall approach is to conduct a *global evaluation* of EU support in the concerned geographic areas, while highlighting regional specificities, differences in response strategies, and varying impacts where necessary.

## The evaluation's thematic priorities



YOUTH  
ENGAGEMENT



ECONOMIC  
INTEGRATION



SOCIAL  
INCLUSION



PEACE AND  
SECURITY

## Methodology

### 5 CASE STUDIES

One regional case study analysing use of regional programmes for supporting youth, and four country case studies.

### 4 FIELD VISITS

Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Türkiye, and Tunisia.

### +1.500 DOCUMENTS

Covering a range of EU policies related to youth, EU global, regional and sectoral policies, regulations, action documents, intervention reports, and evaluations.

### +180 INTERVIEWS

Covering more than 55 and 125 stakeholders respectively at global and case study level.

### 2 E-SURVEYS, +200 RESPONSES

Targeted at EU stakeholders at global and country level, and Youth groups and youth-led organisation in the three regions.

### 1 YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

With representatives from the three regions to act as a sounding board for the evaluation.



## An evolving policy field, confronted with important challenges

The evaluation team observed a high level of interest in the exercise from the start, especially among staff at the EU Delegation level and youth actors interviewed or consulted through a survey, which garnered over 170 responses. Both groups agreed that this was an opportune time to reflect on the progress made in recent years, identify current challenges in youth engagement, and chart a path forward for DG NEAR/EU in the coming years.

While youth have been integrated into EU internal policy since at least 2002, their inclusion in Development, Neighbourhood, and Enlargement policy, as well as in other partner regions, has been more recent. In the period 2000-2010, EU support for youth was generally of an ad hoc and project-basis. Youth issues were largely considered as a topic to be addressed by sector-specific cooperation in areas such as education, technical and vocational training, or small and medium-sized enterprise development, culture and sports.

Particularly from 2015 onwards, the EU developed specific policy frameworks addressing youth issues, as shown in figure 1. The documents acknowledge common youth chal-

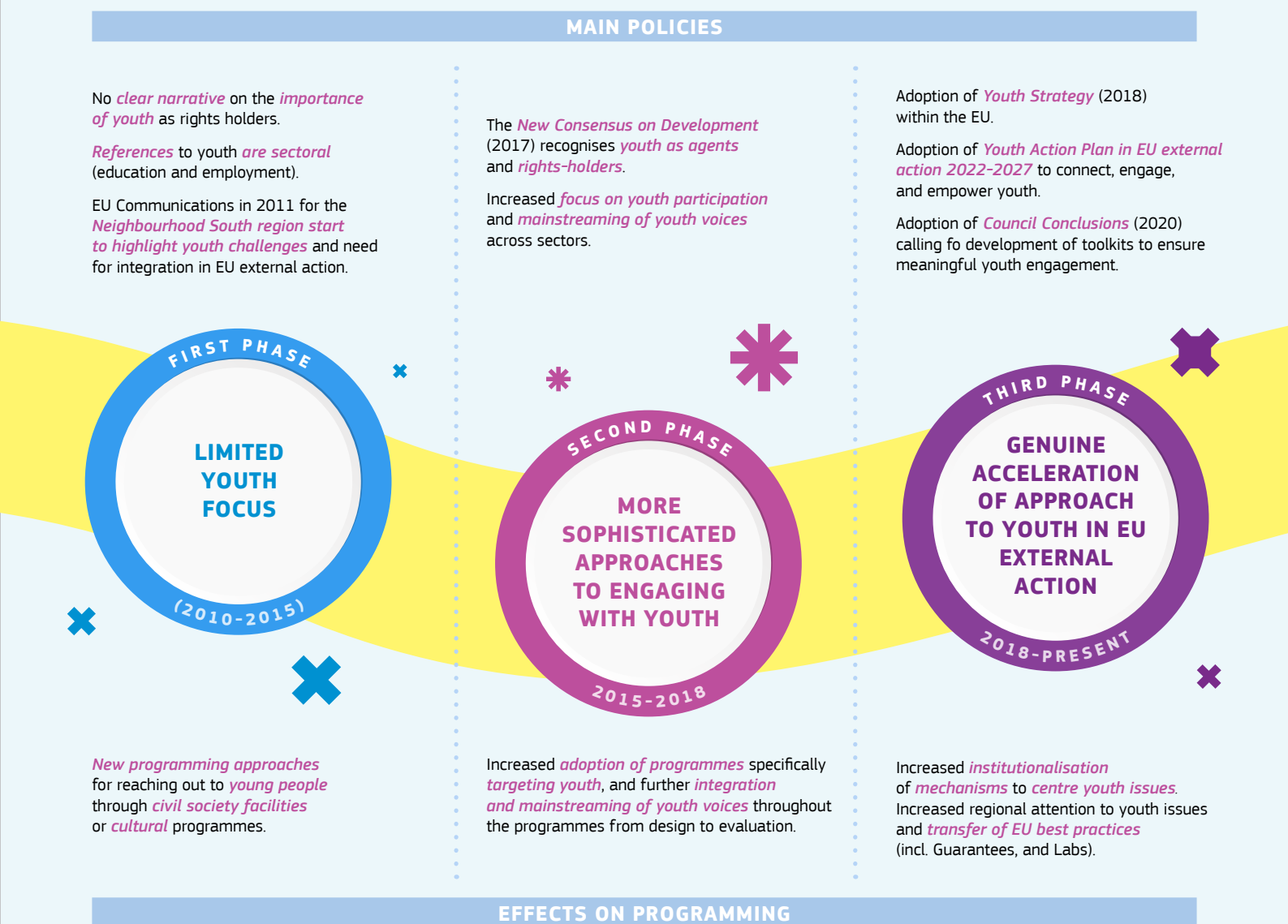
lenges across the three regions and the need for differentiated strategic responses due to varying political and economic conditions. Various drivers at different levels and timescales have elevated the importance of youth in EU external action.

These include:

- The EU's growing awareness of the multifaceted challenges confronting youth in partner countries and the potential cost of inaction (e.g. in terms of social cohesion, radicalisation, conflict, migration).
- Regional dynamics, particularly the Arab Spring, which highlighted the needs of young people, including to express voice, be heard and treated with dignity.
- Evolving international policy frameworks (e.g. the Agenda 2030 and related sustainable development goals, the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2250 related to youth, peace and security).
- New approaches within the Union towards youth.
- More recently, the COVID-19 crisis which particularly affected vulnerable groups, including youth, and the war in Ukraine.



Figure 1. Evolution of youth in EU external action



Source: Particip GmbH

The upgraded status of youth in EU external action has been widely welcomed. Substantial evidence shows positive changes benefiting young people across regions. However, youth challenges remain significant, requiring bolder and more holistic responses from governments and external

agencies like the EU. There is a strong sense of urgency due to the lack of prospects facing diverse young people and the negative effects of ineffective governance, inequalities, and inadequate youth policies.

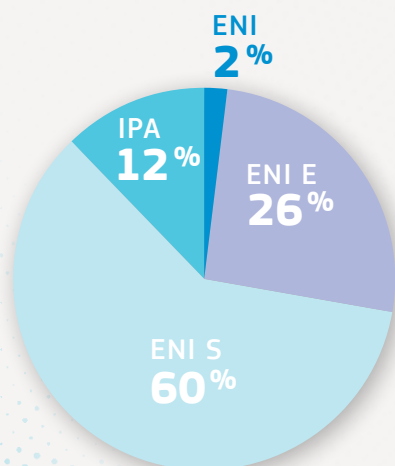
## Overall assessment

*Three overarching messages* emerge from the evaluation:

**1)** During the period under review (2014-2021), the policy domain of youth gained prominence in EU external action. Building on internal dynamics *within* the Union, youth issues received from 2015 onwards higher levels of political commitment, visibility, programmatic support and funding across regions and partner countries covered in this evaluation. In DG NEAR and European Union Delegations (EUDs), there was a shift from ad hoc projects to more strategic forms of engagement, with

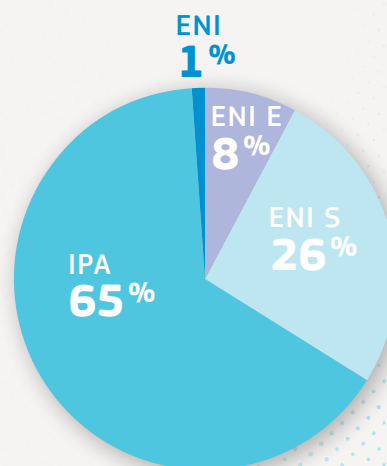
increased country-level programming in the Southern Neighbourhood, stable regional support in the Eastern Neighbourhood, and youth integration within broader sector programmes in the Enlargement region. This was reflected in dedicated interventions targeting youth and initiatives to encourage partner country governments to improve policy, institutional, and regulatory frameworks for youth.

Figure 2. Youth support by region (2014-2022)



### Targeted youth support\*

Amount: approx. EUR 536.6 million\*\*\*



### Significant youth support\*\*

Amount: approx. EUR 4.7 billion\*\*\*

\* Targeted youth support refers to programming which (almost) exclusively targets youth as the main beneficiaries.

\*\* Significant support refers to programming (often sectoral) where youth is one of multiple beneficiaries.

\*\*\* These amounts are approximate figures calculated according to an internal typology developed by the evaluation team, and in the absence of a unified EU wide approach to account for contributions to youth sectors. They should be understood as illustrative rather than exact.

Source: Particip GmbH

- 2) In recent years, the expanding EU external action towards youth has demonstrated its relevance, added value, and impact. As a relatively new policy domain, the process of ensuring coherent response strategies across the regions and countries covered by DG NEAR is still ongoing. Despite substantial progress, significant gaps in policy and practice remain. To achieve greater impact and stronger integration with wider EU foreign policy objectives, this “young” policy domain requires further deepening and consolidation.
- 3) Admittedly, adopting a more strategic, structured, and long-term approach to engaging youth in EU external action is challenging. In many partner countries, power holders are reluctant to empower youth, and civic space is shrinking. Youth actors are increasingly frustrated by the lack of opportunities and tend to disengage from traditional political and social participation avenues. The EU, with numerous geopolitical interests to defend, may be hesitant to prioritise the youth agenda. Additionally, the EU faces the challenge of “too many priorities and too little money” – particularly affecting EU Delegations (EUDs). Although there is considerable support for increased youth engagement, EUDs struggle to absorb another cross-cutting theme due to their substantial workload and well-documented human resource constraints.



# Conclusions

This overall assessment can be spelled out in eight conclusions, presented in the table below:

MAIN CONCLUSIONS	JUSTIFICATION
<p><b>C.1</b></p> <p>Across regions and partner countries, the EU has expanded its engagement with youth, supported by high-level political commitment, enhanced incentives, and increased alignment with EU internal policies. The EU has sought to deliver on this commitment - with different levels of consistency and operationalisation. In the process, it is confronted with recurrent challenges and structural limitations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There has been a quantitative and qualitative leap forward in EU engagement strategies and interventions during the evaluation period. This positive shift occurred in both conducive and restricted environments.</li> <li>EU response strategies towards partner countries display diverse levels of ambitions, quality, consistency, and coherence.</li> <li>The EU has faced recurrent challenges and limitations in its efforts in the three regions covered linked to prevailing political economy conditions, the complexity of adopting inclusive youth approaches, and internal capacity/funding constraints.</li> </ul>
<p><b>C.2</b></p> <p>The progress in the EU's engagement with youth action has not been underpinned by a shared, internalised set of policies providing a clear mandate and complementary operational guidance. As a result, there is confusion regarding the place and weight of the youth agenda and the most suitable response strategies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The policy frameworks guiding the EU expanding work on youth were quite generic in nature. This favoured the adoption of a bottom-up experimental "laboratory" approach primarily driven by EUDs.</li> <li>While this allowed for learning-by-doing and fostered relevant innovations, it introduced widely diverging strategic responses by EUDs which were not necessarily based on objective needs and opportunities to engage with youth.</li> <li>The lack of a clear mandate and central steering lead to confusion on whether youth is a sector, a target group or an issue that needs to be mainstreamed in all public policies.</li> <li>The lack of operational guidance helps to explain why EUDs tend to struggled with many "how-to-do" questions.</li> <li>The 2021 Youth Action Plan is the first all-encompassing policy framework for the EU's external action. Its strength lies in the potential for synergies between Europe's growing internal youth agendas. Its weakness is the risk associated with the potential imposition of models that may not be aptly suited to different contexts.</li> </ul>
<p><b>C.3</b></p> <p>EUDs have identified relevant entry points for youth support striving for alignment using a sound mix of instruments and modalities, while displaying flexibility when needed. Other elements proved more challenging (with differences among regions).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EU alignment with national strategies and priorities took place in conducive environments. In more difficult contexts, the EU had to search for feasible entry points and implementation approaches, with mixed success.</li> <li>EU support scored generally well in terms of: i) data collection and analyses regarding youth challenges; ii) recognition of national and regional specificities; iii) consultations on programming priorities; and iv) the choice of delivery methods (including budget support) used in a flexible manner.</li> <li>The track record is more mixed regarding: i) fostering ownership of reform agendas; ii) selecting suitable implementing agencies; iii) facilitating direct access to EU funding; iv) ensuring synergies and complementarities within the EU youth portfolio; v) building strategic partnerships; and vi) conducting regular and result-oriented policy/political dialogue.</li> </ul>
<p><b>C.4</b></p> <p>There are promising experiences with genuine youth-centred approaches in EU supported interventions, but they are still rather limited in number and fragmented. The concept remains poorly internalised, while guidance and technical support are not readily available, and monitoring of progress achieved is weak, diminishing the collective learning potential.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The concept of "youth-centred approaches" - where young people are involved as actors and "rights-holders" rather than as "beneficiaries" - is still in its infancy across the regions.</li> <li>While young people are generally consulted there is limited space to define and get funding for their own agendas.</li> <li>Recent initiatives to put in place Youth Labs have tried to foster the co-creation of policies with state actors, yet these experiments are still young and in need of consolidation.</li> <li>The limited progress is linked to knowledge and capacity constraints, reliance on implementing agencies (which do not apply youth-centred approaches), and reluctance by governments to foster genuine youth empowerment.</li> </ul>

MAIN CONCLUSIONS	JUSTIFICATION
<p><b>C.5</b></p> <p>The EU still has to find the right balance between taking inspiration from European policies, models, and approaches in its external action and accepting that a high degree of “localisation” is needed to ensure relevance, effectiveness, and impact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The expansion of the EU's engagement strategies with youth in external actions has partly been driven by rapidly evolving dynamics within Europe. This has resulted in a clear blurring of lines between EU internal and external actions in this policy domain.</li> <li>● This cross-fertilisation helped the EU external action cope with the new demands for knowledge and expertise arising from its stronger involvement in youth matters, often accompanied by valued support from line DGs.</li> <li>● However, the overall track record of aligning with internal EU policies and transfer of European models and practices is mixed. In conducive environments, there has been an effective, demand-driven uptake of European know-how and lessons learnt.</li> <li>● In other partner countries (particularly from the Neighbourhood South), there has been political and bureaucratic resistance to importing models, while EU programmes struggled to “localise” agenda-setting, design and implement interventions fitting to youth realities and expectations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>C.6</b></p> <p>There is a mismatch between expanding EU ambitions to engage with youth in the DG NEAR region and the overall institutional capacity to respond to increasingly heterogeneous situations, difficult political economy situations in partner countries, diverse youth expectations, and the need for impact and sustainability assessments based on robust M&amp;E systems.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Youth focal points were active in most EUDs of the regions, with mixed levels of outreach, effectiveness, and impact.</li> <li>● Dedicated and competent staff at HQ levels provide valued services to EUDs. Yet DG NEAR lacks resources to optimally play some critical steering and strategic roles.</li> <li>● The involvement of other line DGs and specialised agencies proved valuable, but they tended to have a restricted mandate, scope for engagement, and funding.</li> <li>● Some youth programmes have developed M&amp;E systems that adequately document achievements. However, most have rather basic M&amp;E systems, focusing primarily on activities and outputs, with much less emphasis on qualitative changes and outcomes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>C.7</b></p> <p>EU support for youth generated positive dynamics and effects in all priority intervention areas, with stronger emphasis on economic integration and social inclusion. However, progress was more limited on other key challenges due to adverse conditions in partner countries and strategic or operational choices by the EU. There were also missed opportunities to address pressing youth issues, particularly in the areas of peace and security.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● There were positive achievements in all four thematic areas of EU support towards youth but with important variations.</li> <li>● The EUDs have faced considerable challenges in promoting youth participation, leadership, and skills development in policy processes.</li> <li>● Young people have become more actively involved in policy dialogues relevant to the EU, fostering a greater understanding of European values, and aiding the public diplomacy efforts of the EUDs.</li> <li>● There is solid evidence that EU projects have made significant contributions at national and regional levels to pressing youth issues such as employment, employability, entrepreneurship, digital skills, education linked to labour market needs, and youth mobility (particularly through Erasmus+). Strategic EU investments in vocational education and training, especially for marginalised groups like refugee youth, have had a notable impact.</li> <li>● EU's support in the area of peace, security, reconciliation, and countering extremism have been less pronounced. Limited EU action also on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) or mental health.</li> <li>● In difficult environments, the EU bumped into a wide range of political economy constraints for effective action in terms of fostering reforms or empowering youth.</li> </ul>
<p><b>C.8</b></p> <p>The sustainability of the outcomes achieved is uncertain and depends on factors both within and beyond the EU's control.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Despite a wide range of positive dynamics and effects, the sustainability of outcomes achieved seems limited overall.</li> <li>● Major challenges exist in terms of ensuring four types of sustainability: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- political sustainability - embodied by the growing ownership of youth agendas and robust public policies, as well as advances in broader governance, addressing root causes of youth brain drain, migration, and marginalisation.</li> <li>- financial sustainability - reflected in the existence of meaningful national/regional budgets for promoting youth over a longer period.</li> <li>- institutional sustainability - realised by empowering state agencies to effectively implement (as duty bearers) public policies and deliver the goods and services to diverse categories of young people.</li> <li>- socio-cultural sustainability, reflected in the adequacy of the youth policies and approaches adopted considering prevailing political economy realities, societal norms, and youth expectations/capacities.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



## Recommendations

The summary of recommendations below primarily addresses strategic actions for the EU to enhance its influence, impact, and visibility regarding youth in external action. The main report provides a wide range of concrete operational suggestions for each of these seven recommendations.

### R.1 Ensure political leadership by implementing a process to elevate the profile, significance, and role of youth in EU external action over the coming years.

Despite an environment not conducive to major reforms, EU leadership should aim to reinforce the political foundations of its youth policy over the next five years. This can be achieved by reframing the narrative and expanding support within Europe and Member States for bolder action. This is needed to i) enhance the impact of EU cooperation efforts; ii) foster the EU's own geopolitical, foreign policy, security and migration interests; iii) leverage the potential of youth as crucial actors in countries at a tipping point between democratic/open societies and authoritarian/closed societies, as current events in Georgia demonstrate.

### R.2 Upgrade the EU's overall youth policy framework through a landmark Communication.

The EU should invest in a broad multi-actor process to come up with a more elaborated, shared, and coherent vision and policy framework regarding youth in external action. The resulting policy should elaborate and refine the existing 'Youth Action Plan' (developed through broad consultations with EUDs) by making more explicit and clear political, strategic and operational choices regarding the role of youth in all relevant dimensions of EU external action, the level of EU ambitions, the core objectives to be pursued as well as guidance on key implementation approaches (e.g. on mainstreaming, localisation, youth-centred approaches, sustainability). Clarity should be provided on how to align to diverging political economy realities and youth dynamics in partner countries and regions (i.e. the principle of differentiation). Ideally, this is embedded in a landmark EU Communication.

### R.3 Provide a clear mandate to deliver on EU commitments.

Developing a more convincing narrative (see R1) and a shared vision/coherent policy framework (see R2) may not suffice to ensure effective uptake and delivery down the chain. Taking inspiration from experiences gained in the fields of gender and civil society, the EU should adopt a mandatory approach regarding youth in external action. This could help to ensure more coherent EU responses across the board and incentivise EUDs to better respond to pressing youth challenges in their respective settings. Different options exist, including the use of a youth marker or the requirement for each EUD to develop a 'youth roadmap' to foster more strategic and integrated approaches.

### R.4 Enhance youth agency and ownership.

The EU should increase the space available for youth actors in agenda setting, design, and implementation of support programmes, as well as the various dialogue processes at different levels. To ensure greater relevance, effectiveness and sustainable impact, the EU should systematically apply youth-centred approaches in all aspects of its engagement strategies carefully select implementing agencies that possess the necessary knowledge and expertise to empower youth as rights-holders. This can be done by building on existing good practices, such as the setting up of youth advisory structures (now unfolding) or the organisation of trainings with INTPA for EUD staff.

### R.5 Promote a higher degree of localisation of response strategies.

The EU should find a better balance between using internal models and good practices for working with youth, aligned with internal policies, and the need for localisation to ensure relevant, realistic, and feasible implementation that reinforces ownership by both youth actors and governments. This involves adopting bottom-up approaches that begin with local realities and youth values, priorities, and dynamics before considering European models and good practices, which may not always fit the specific context and purpose.

## R.6 Strengthen the complementary and coherent use of bilateral, regional, thematic and global instruments in a Team Europe spirit.

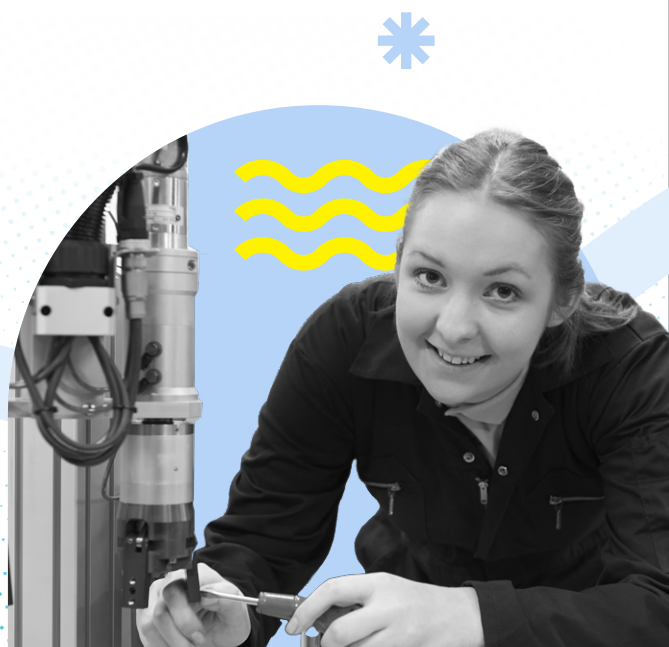
The EU should better link its efforts at bilateral, regional, and global levels in promoting youth engagement and, where possible, apply a Team Europe approach. This involves fostering a “whole of Delegation” strategy in the youth domain to reduce silos and reinforce synergies between different interventions in the EUD portfolio.

## R.7 Find creative ways to enhance levels of knowledge and expertise.

In the light of prevailing structural constraints in terms of human resources and funding, it does not seem realistic to merely recommend a substantial increase of “staff and budgets”. The EU should find alternative ways to reduce the mismatch between EU ambitions and response capacities. Feasible alternatives include to: i) make a better use of youth focal points; ii) further expand collaboration with DG INTPA (particularly its better endowed thematic unit), line DGs and specialised agencies; iii) develop strategic partnerships with Member States and like-minded agencies and iv) explore ways to expand the remit/outreach of the Knowledge Hub for expertise on Youth or to put in additional technical assistance facilities to support EUDs (including to ensure a more qualitative monitoring, evaluation and learning).

## R.8 Improve the overall conditions to achieve results and reinforce sustainability.

Building on positive achievements in the past years and factoring in the overall (deteriorating) environment in many partner countries, the EU should refine its results, sustainability strategies, and approaches. This will entail putting into practice, as far as possible, the above recommendations (R 1 to 7). It also requires a systematic use of theories of change with solid assumptions, as well a stronger focus on the different sustainability dimensions (political, institutional, financial, and socio-cultural).



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A4.Coordination of financing instruments -  
performance, results and evaluation

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Objectives of the evaluation

### *Purpose and objectives*

The evaluation served a *dual purpose* of accountability and learning. The main objectives were to: i) provide an independent and evidence-based assessment of the European Union's past and current external action support to youth and, based on this assessment, ii) provide lessons learnt and recommendations for decision-makers at EU level.

The *specific objectives* of the evaluation were:

- to assess in qualitative and quantitative terms the relevance, implementation conditions and performance of EU external action support to youth, particularly its efficiency, effectiveness, coherence, sustainability, and impact;
- to assess the EU's cooperation potential, and added value; and
- to identify lessons learnt (both positive and negative), best practices and recommendations regarding explanatory factors that hamper the contributions of EU support to youth, policy development, policy dialogue and related coherence, as well as on operational aspects in the field of youth.

## 1.2 Evaluation scope

### *Legal scope*

The analysis covered both *spending* and *non-spending actions*. It examined all *funding mechanisms* and *modalities* of implementation used under the Instrument for IPA II and III, the European Neighbourhood Instrument/ENI, EIDHR and NDICI-GE. The evaluation also covers the actions implemented in the *DG NEAR* regions under Erasmus+, as well as the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye/FRIT and Trust Funds that were implemented in the regions during the period under review.

### *Geographic and temporal scope*

The *geographical (Enlargement and Neighbourhood regions) and temporal (2014-2021) scope* was clearly delineated in the ToR (see Volume II section 1). Given that the programming cycles related to NDICI-GE and IPA III started recently, the assessment of the EU's past and current external action support to youth focussed on funding related to the last programming cycle (2014-2020). Although it ran in parallel with the *programming* related to the Multi-annual Financial Framework 2021-2027, the timing of the evaluation should allow its results to inform the planning, design, implementation, and monitoring of new interventions launched in the context of the IPA III and NDICI-GE. This evaluation started shortly after the launch of the *Youth Action Plan*, which will constitute the external dimension of the EU Youth Strategy and is expected to contribute to the ambition of a "Stronger Europe in the World".

### *Thematic scope*

The evaluation focussed on four thematic priorities: i) *youth engagement*, ii) *economic integration*, iii) *social inclusion*, and iv) *peace and security*.

## 2 Key methodological elements

### 2.1 Overall methodological approach

#### *Evaluation guided by three principles*

The evaluation was guided by three main principles, which informed the design, data collection, and analysis at all levels of this assignment:

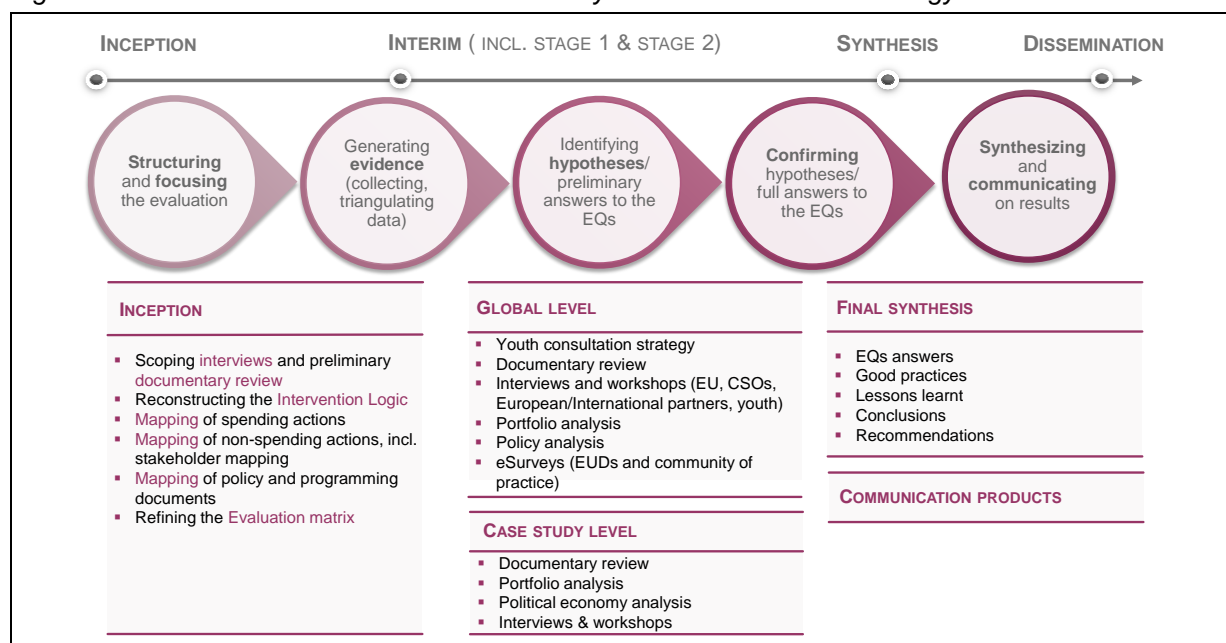
- **Political economy- and culture-sensitive approach:** the evaluation considered regional and national contexts in understanding EU engagement with youth, including power structures, social and cultural norms, and the interests of various actors. It aimed to assess the ownership of engagement efforts by regional/national power holders and implications for transformational change.
- **Holistic approach:** aligned with Council conclusions, the evaluation adopted integrated approaches to youth issues, addressing crucial nexus issues like employment and education, SRHR, and participation in policy-making and democracy. It examined cross-fertilisation between EU efforts towards youth within Europe and in external action.
- **Youth-centred approach in diversity:** the evaluation explored the benefits of youth-centred approaches, emphasising meaningful engagement in design, implementation, and evaluation. It focussed on how the EU fostered youth agency across diverse groups and included young people from marginalised or discriminated backgrounds.

#### *Methodological framework*

The methodological framework was designed to develop an understanding of what works and what does not and under which conditions, with the aim to distil lessons learnt and apply them to future support efforts. The analytical framework relied on **seven Evaluation Questions (EQ)** and the reconstruction of the intervention logic underpinning the design and delivery of EU support to Youth. The intervention logic and evaluation matrix developed during the inception phase, based on the draft versions provided in the ToR, were tested, updated, and adjusted during data collection and the intermediary phase.

The study was conducted in **four main phases**. Figure 3 provides an overview of the phases of the evaluation and the key tools for collecting and analysing data used in each phase.

Figure 3 Phases of the evaluation and key elements of the methodology



Source: Evaluation team

*A well-balanced mix of methods* As highlighted in Figure 3 above, the team applied a *mixed methods approach* to answer each EQ, using both *quantitative and qualitative tools and methods*. The main tools/methods used were:

1. *Document review* at three levels (global level, regional case study, country case study).
2. *Interviews* with over 180 key informants at global (approximately 55 persons) and case study level (approximately 125 persons). These included relevant representatives from the European Commission at Headquarters (HQ) and EUD level, international organisation, international Civil Society Organisations (CSO), local and regional CSOs, networks, national youth councils, the international financial institutions, other partners, some beneficiaries, as well as individuals from national authorities both from EU Member States and partner countries.
3. *A statistical analysis of financial data* as well as other project-level data obtained from DG NEAR as well as other involved Directorate Generals (DG).
4. *Two targeted online surveys*, one targeting EU staff in HQ and EUDs in the partner countries (34 respondents), and one targeting EU-informed youth groups and youth-led organisations (173 respondents).

Table 1 below summarises the main purpose and key elements of the approach envisaged for each tool/method.

Table 1 Main tools and methods

Tools/Methods	Approach/Description	Purpose
<b>Document review</b>	The team carried out an extensive documentary review covering two levels: i) overall strategy, and ii) sector/intervention level. The review at the overall strategy level covered EU policy, strategy and programming documents, guidelines, internal reporting, reviews, and progress reports undertaken and/or commissioned by the EU and other development partners implementing EU support to youth. The review at sector/intervention level covered documentation directly related to the main thematic areas targeted by EU support, as well as broader youth issues, and includes: i) project documentation, ii) reviews/studies in the relevant sectors of focus in the evaluation (related to EU support to youth but also to the sector in general), and iii) data/reports produced by organisations which are recipients of EU support as well as other organisations.	The analysis served to obtain a detailed overview of the EU interventions on youth in the Neighbourhood and Western Balkans regions. The relevant information collected during the documentary review fed into the answers to the EQs providing either evidence directly underpinning the main evaluation findings or information that helps to contextualise these findings.
<b>Interviews</b>	The team complemented the documentation review with semi-structured interviews (over 180) with the main stakeholders at the European Headquarters/EU HQs and EUD level (through video calls). During the field component of the interim phase, the team conducted semi-structured interviews with all targeted stakeholders in line with the approach developed during the inception phase. These included EUDs, government authorities, beneficiaries and key EU partners, such as the European Training Foundation/ETF, Anna Lindh Foundation/ALF, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), and National Youth Councils (predominantly in the Neighbourhood East region). The team also conducted in-depth key informant interviews with key youth organisations remotely and at the in-country level (within the case study validation missions).	Interviews were useful for obtaining detailed qualitative views of varying the stakeholders concerned on relevant EQs and Judgment Criteria and indicators, as well as on main weaknesses and strengths of instruments and policies.
<b>Statistical analysis</b>	Building on a dataset provided by DG NEAR during the inception phase, the evaluation team refined the inventory to strengthen the statistical analysis of	Analysis of outputs/outcomes and financial flows in the selected

Tools/ Methods	Approach/Description	Purpose
	financial data. Mapping of EU spending data on youth was essential to establishing a financial, thematic, and geographic understanding of the key features of the EU's portfolio and its development over time. See section 3.2 for summary of the mapping, and Volume II Annex 2 for the detailed results.	sectors strengthens the robustness of the contribution analysis.
<b>Online surveys</b>	Two online surveys were used to collect the perceptions of key stakeholders and validate the emerging findings of the evaluation after the interim phase. The surveys targeted two distinct audiences. The first survey targeted EU stakeholders (DG NEAR, European External Action Service/EEAS and EUD officials). It received 34 respondents, a 35% response rate. The second survey targeted informed youth groups and youth-led organisations. It received 173 responses, with a 32% response rate. Both surveys were structured, offering multiple choice options and the opportunity for respondents to provide additional qualitative information. See Volume II Annex 6 for detailed survey questionnaires and detailed results.	Both surveys aimed to validate emerging findings, aggregate and generalise views of key stakeholders, and fill in key data gaps. The first survey of the European Headquarters/EU HQs staff and EUDs focussed on EU institutional issues pertaining to support in the three regions. The second aimed to capture and aggregate youth perspectives on EU support in the three regions. Both survey results feed into the synthesis and development of recommendations in the Final Report.

Source: Evaluation team

*A robust triangulation process based on multiple sources of information*

The complexity of thematic/instrument evaluations makes it particularly important for the team to count on *updated and reliable data and information*. These can be obtained through access to documents, databases, or direct or indirect interaction with stakeholders and beneficiaries. The *robustness of the collected evidence* was assessed in accordance with the Commission's Better Regulation guidelines. The team triangulated collected information and data where possible in order to progressively build answers to the EQs and Judgment Criteria/JCs. Through a coordinated effort of DG NEAR and EUDs, the evaluation team finalised the gathering of the basic documentation by late May 2023. During the field phase, the collected data and information was complemented further with interviews related to the four case country studies (*Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Türkiye, and Tunisia*) and the regional case study comparing EU policies and practices towards youth in the three regions covered by this evaluation. A second e-survey was launched to a broad variety of stakeholders not covered by the first e-survey. Table 2 below summarises the main sources of data that have been explored – see also section 2.2 for the challenges faced by the evaluation during the data collection process. Between February and March 2024, the various case country reports were validated by the respective EUDs.

*Valuable support of the Youth Advisory Board*

The evaluation team took the initiative to set up a *Youth Advisory Board* (YAB) for this specific evaluation. With the help of regional organisations and specialised agencies, a board of *three independent and experienced youth activists/workers* was selected (in close interaction with DG NEAR/evaluation task manager). The YAB provided useful advice to the team at several stages, particularly regarding the survey for youth actors (e.g. content, possible respondents). It also acted as a sounding board to test the solidity of findings, emerging conclusions, and recommendations.

Table 2 Primary and secondary data sources

Primary sources
Stakeholder consultation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews with European Commission/EC staff working on EU support to youth in the Neighbourhood regions and Western Balkans.</li> <li>Interviews with officials from EUDs.</li> <li>Interviews with EU partners, CSOs and international organisations.</li> <li>Interviews with government officials.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews with youth groups, and youth-led organisations.</li> <li>• E-survey EU staff (HQ and EUDs).</li> <li>• E-survey youth.</li> </ul>	
Secondary sources	
EU and international financial institutions sources (documents and databases)	Other sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU Inventory dataset – Data on financial contributions by the EC.</li> <li>• EU Youth project documentation:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Formulation documents for EU interventions (e.g. action documents).</li> <li>◦ Grant Application Form and Delegation agreements.</li> <li>◦ Progress and final reports.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• EU and other relevant partners' Programming documents.</li> <li>• Reports, and if possible, databases and/or documentation, of previous evaluations.</li> <li>• Outputs and reports from Technical Assistance action.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reports from international organisations and think tanks.</li> <li>• Reports from national and international CSOs.</li> <li>• Reports and/or documentation, of previous evaluations.</li> <li>• Annual Reporting.</li> <li>• Documents on national legal framework and government sector policies/strategies (incl. reports on their implementation).</li> <li>• Academic literature on youth</li> <li>• Studies and surveys on youth realities and needs.</li> </ul>

Source: Evaluation team

## 2.2 Challenges and limitations

### *Absence of clear youth definition or youth markers to identify relevant interventions*

The absence of youth markers and a clear definition of youth areas necessitated that the team create their own *typology* to understand different categories of youth actions (see Box 1 for typology). This had two implications. First, stakeholders within the EU had different definitions of what constitutes youth action and how it should be understood. Second, the mapping of EU spending in youth areas could not provide exact estimates but rather an approximation of the size of the portfolio.

### *Stakeholders assessed interventions and their relevance for youth differently*

The cross-cutting nature of youth actions and its relative “newness” as a policy area meant that EU stakeholders assessed interventions and their relevance for youth differently. This was evident throughout the evaluation, where EU stakeholders did not consistently define what interventions are relevant to youth or what youth support looked like. Accordingly, it was important for the team to clearly define what these categories meant for the evaluation and focus on interventions that: i) are *specifically dedicated to target youth*, or ii) where *youth is a key target group* (among others) with a view to reduce complexity. Furthermore, the absence of a clear, comprehensive, and shared policy framework for engaging with youth – a situation only partially addressed by the 2021 Youth Action Plan – as well as the lack of operational guidance on many “how-to-do” questions led to diverging views on key aspects of youth interventions. For instance, in the e-survey for EU staff, respondents claim that the EU is globally applying “youth-centred approaches” in its support programmes. Yet interviews with EUDs, technical staff or youth actors involved, bring a different, more critical view on levels of progress achieved in this respect.

### *Delays due to lack of access to documentation or limited stakeholder responsiveness*

The evaluation faced significant challenges regarding *access to documents and stakeholders' responsiveness*. A malfunctioning online platform delayed access to crucial documentation, leading the team to rely on individual requests to obtain intervention-level documents, creating an administrative burden for both the team and EU officials. Response rates varied, and some key documents remained inaccessible, affecting the completeness of dossiers and complicating the understanding of evaluated interventions. Furthermore, engaging with stakeholders, particularly at the EUD level, was hindered by busy schedules, limited availability, and perceptions of inadequate information about the evaluation, resulting in delays in confirming field missions and even dropping one case study.

### Measuring results and impact

The evaluation faced particular challenges in *assessing outcomes and the impact of EU external action* – beyond the standard challenges expected in all strategic evaluations. These reside in the young nature of the policy domain – as reflected in generic policy frameworks and, logically, less developed intervention logics or theories of change. The shift towards structured and strategic EU programmes in the youth area is a fairly recent process. Quite understandably, the EU is still struggling to develop adequate M&E systems to assess progress in youth empowerment in different areas – all of them affected by political, institutional, and societal factors beyond the control of the EU.

## 3 Evolution of EU support

### 3.1 Youth policy framework

#### International policy frameworks and commitments guiding youth policy emerged recently

**At the global level, the recognition of youth as a distinct policy domain requiring sophisticated narratives and specific strategies was a gradual process.** The pivotal moment came with the adoption of the *Agenda 2030*<sup>1</sup> by the United Nations (UN) in September 2015, replacing the Millennium Development Goals with a more inclusive focus that actively involved young people in its formulation. The Agenda 2030, encapsulated in 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets, and underscored the importance of inclusivity and shared prosperity, particularly for vulnerable or marginalised youth. The *Addis Ababa Action Agenda*, adopted in July 2015, complemented this by emphasising the necessity of investing in youth for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. These global milestones, to which the EU contributed significantly, were later reflected in EU policy frameworks such as the *European Consensus on Development* (2017),<sup>2</sup> aligning EU development policy with the youth-centric approach of the Agenda 2030. Youth was also gaining attention at the thematic level. The 2015 *UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security*<sup>3</sup> marked a significant influence on EU external action towards youth. Recognising the positive role of young people in peace and security efforts, the Resolution called for increased support and participation of youth in conflict prevention and peace-building. Building upon this, the EU committed to supporting the youth-peace-security agenda through various means, including high-level dialogues and coherent programming. Additionally, other global policy developments in UN processes regarding children's rights, gender, and relevant International Labour Organisation/ILO Conventions, among others, continued to shape EU policy formulation towards youth, highlighting the ongoing importance of international frameworks in guiding youth-focussed policies and strategies.

#### Evolution of the EU's external action approach to youth in three distinct phases

**From 2010 to 2015, youth issues received limited political attention**, with EU policy documents lacking a clear narrative on the significance of youth as development actors and rights-holders. Although the Arab Spring brought some focus on youth in the Neighbourhood South region, there was no comprehensive rethinking of EU policies towards youth. During this phase, youth issues were mostly addressed within specific sector policies or as one target group among others.

**The second phase, from 2015 to 2018, marked a significant shift towards a more sophisticated approach to engaging with youth.** Influenced by global policy developments such as the Agenda 2030, the EU began to recognise youth as critical agents and changemakers while calling for the adoption of a rights-based approach. The *2017 New Consensus on Development* confirmed this shift by acknowledging the urgency of addressing youth needs and outlining concrete commitments to support youth empowerment, education, employment, and participation in decision-making processes. However, this document and other youth-related policies elaborated during this period, also at the regional level, were

<sup>1</sup> United Nations (2015): Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

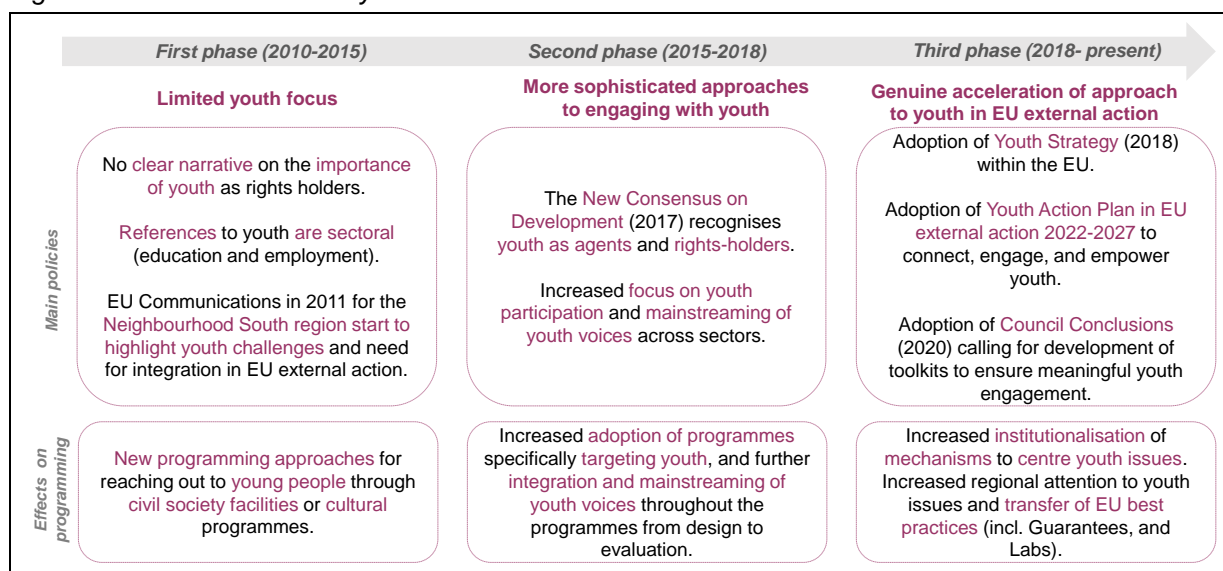
<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2017): The new European Consensus on Development. Our world, our dignity, our future. Joint Statement.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations (2015): Security Council, Resolution 2250 of 9 December 2015.

quite generic, providing limited clarity on political mandates given to the EU or operational guidance.

**From 2018 to the present, a third phase has seen a further acceleration of EU policy developments on youth, within the EU and in external action.** This was catalysed by the adoption of a *Youth Strategy for engaging, connecting, and empowering young people within the EU in 2018*,<sup>4</sup> followed by the *2020 Council Conclusions*<sup>5</sup> stressing the need for a coherent and comprehensive approach to youth in external action, highlighting the importance of meaningful youth engagement in shaping EU policies and actions globally. Although the *NDICI Regulation*<sup>6</sup> of 2021 did not contain extensive references to youth, it affirmed the EU's commitment to empowering youth. The introduction of a *Youth Action Plan for EU external action 2022-2027*,<sup>7</sup> largely mirrored on European youth policies and practices, emphasised the importance of strategic partnerships with youth and aligned with EU values regarding human rights, gender equality, and social inclusion. These developments reflect the search for a more holistic and integrated approach to youth engagement within EU external action and development cooperation.

Figure 4 Evolution of youth focus in EU external action



Source: Particip

#### *Regional EU frameworks in the Neighbourhood and Western Balkan regions*

**In the Neighbourhood East region, the EU's engagement with youth has been outlined through various policy documents and initiatives.** The 2011 Communication "*A new response to a changing Neighbourhood*" included references to investing in youth education and exchanges, setting a foundation for subsequent evolutions in youth policy within Neighbourhood East countries. Notably, the "*20 Deliverables for 2020*" outlined priorities for supporting and empowering the younger generation, highlighting the importance of skill development, civic engagement, and employability. The recommendations from the 3rd Neighbourhood East region Youth Summit reiterated the significance of treating young people as active citizens and fostering their entrepreneurial spirit, contributing to ongoing developments in youth policy within the region.

**In the Neighbourhood South region, the Arab Spring of 2011 prompted a stronger focus on youth within EU development cooperation and external**

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2018): Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy. Communication.

<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union (2020): Youth in external action. Council conclusions. 5 June 2020.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2021): NDICI Regulation. 14 June 2021. Article 8, par. 3.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission (2021): Youth Action Plan (YAP) in EU external action 2022-2027. Promoting meaningful youth participation and empowerment in EU external action for sustainable development, equality and peace. Joint Communication.

**action.** Core communications issued between 2011 and 2021 demonstrated the evolving and more sophisticated approaches towards youth, as exemplified by the 2021 Communication on a “Renewed Partnership” with the *Neighbourhood South region*.<sup>8</sup> It highlighted the political prominence of youth within EU external action and stressed the vital role of investing in young people to achieve sustainable development goals, underscoring the empowerment, and involvement of youth as agents of change.

**The EU's engagement with youth in the Western Balkans has been catalysed by accession dynamics linked to European integration, leading to the formulation of national youth strategies and sectoral policies.** The 2018 Communication on “*A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*” highlighted the significance of investing in the younger generation for future European citizenship, prioritising youth, education, and skills for cross-border cooperation/CBC. Concurrently, initiatives such as the Berlin Process and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) have fostered regional cooperation, facilitating intergovernmental collaboration and youth exchanges, particularly focused on reconciliation. Organisations like the South-East European Cooperation Council and the Regional Cooperation Council/RCC have committed to supporting youth policies and inclusion in decision-making processes, underscoring a concerted effort to promote youth engagement and regional cooperation throughout the Enlargement Region. Furthermore, in 2020 the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans was adopted. The Youth Guarantee is the flagship 10 of this scheme. It brought significant attention and focus on youth. It led to the setting up in 2021 at the EU (NEAR, EMPL, ETF) – Western Balkan Ministerial Meeting on Employment and Social affairs – International Labour Organisation/ILO technical assistance facility to support the preparation and adoption of the Youth Guarantee. Worth noting is also the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sports, endorsed by the governments of the region in December 2020. It seeks to further strengthen accession dynamics in the above policy areas. Young people stand to benefit from the opportunities outlined in this Agenda, specifically as it seeks to create more inclusive and performing (vocational) education and training systems, increase participation in the polity and society, and through in youth exchanges in the region and the EU.

## 3.2 Mapping EU support to youth

### Box 1 Mapping youth support in the context of EU external action

The mapping of EU support for youth built on an enumeration of spending and non-spending actions and was essential to establishing a financial, thematic, and geographic understanding of the key features of the EU's portfolio and its development over time (see Volume II Annex 5 for detailed mapping). Since the evolution of “youth” as a policy was relatively new, there were no clear EU institutional definitions or typologies to understand or mark support to youth in the three regions. Therefore, the team adopted the following internal typology to sort youth interventions and understand EU spending activities in this area:

- **Targeted:** EU interventions where youth are the primary target or support to sectors where youth are the primary group benefiting from the action (including Vocational Education and Training (VET)/higher education, Erasmus+ Youth, youth mobility).
- **Significant component:** EU support where youth is one of the main beneficiaries, but not exclusively (programmes supporting civil society engagement and dialogue initiatives, culture, education, social inclusion and cohesion, reconciliation, employability).
- **Other mainstreamed:** Interventions in sectors relevant to youth (economic support programmes, large education facilities, democratic participation) – i.e. where youth is one of the (indirect) beneficiaries or where it can be expected that their interest has been mainstreamed.

#### EU youth interventions

During 2014-2022, **EU allocations to targeted youth support and related sectors in the Neighbourhood and Western Balkans regions amounted to EUR 536.6 million** (including Erasmus+ programming), and over EUR 4.7 billion in

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2021): Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. A new agenda for the Mediterranean. Joint Communication.

(2014-2022) at a glance

sectors where youth were a significant component.<sup>9</sup> The following four features marked the support:

- The **volume of targeted youth support** was topped by *Morocco*, *Tunisia* and *Egypt*, followed by *Armenia*, *Belarus* and regional funding for the *Neighbourhood East region*. *Türkiye* receives a substantial proportion of EU interventions with significant youth support, benefiting from support under EIDHR, measures addressing the Syria crisis, and *Education and Training programmes/EVET* focussing on economic integration.
- **Economic integration interventions received the highest proportion of sectoral funding (83%)**, including investment in vocational training, higher education, skill for employment, and mobility schemes. Participation and youth engagement activities received the second highest funding, with approximately 13% of primary spending.
- **National authorities were the primary channel for delivering targeted support for youth, followed by EU Member State agencies** (e.g. German International Development Agency/GIZ, ENABEL) and institutions implementing Erasmus+ actions. National Non-Governmental Organisation/NGOs, particularly in the *Enlargement region*, constituted the third largest channel, implementing youth exchange programmes and facilitating civil society dialogue on youth participation. Regional variations are notable, however, with spending in the *Neighbourhood East region* mainly channelled through national Non-Governmental Organisations/NGOs, while the *Neighbourhood South region* relied more on national authorities (through budget support) and the *IPA region* predominantly utilising civil society facilities.
- **Grants and contribution agreements were the primary modalities for channelling EU support to targeted youth actions**, each accounting for approximately 31% and 30% of funding, respectively. These included agreements with UN agencies, local Non-Governmental Organisation/NGOs, and pillar-assessed Member State agencies. Budget support constituted 18% of the youth support portfolio.

Evolution of spending on youth actions over time

The EU stepped up its targeted support to youth in 2015, mainly in the *Neighbourhood South region*. As illustrated in Figure 3, funding in the *Neighbourhood South region* seemed to fluctuate but remained the highest regionally. The sharp increases were driven by one-year special allocations on youth engagement within targeted facilities or the disbursement of budget support for youth in *Morocco*. Funding for the *Neighbourhood East region* developed in 2016 and remained relatively stable during the reporting period, while the accession region received almost no targeted funding for youth programming.

The *Neighbourhood region* accounted for the majority of targeted support to youth, with 60% of spending going to the *Neighbourhood South region*. The large proportion of this spending is explained by several key flagship youth programmes, such as the *Special Measure for Erasmus+ in Tunisia Programme d'appui à l'éducation, la mobilité, la recherche et l'innovation en Tunisie/EMORI*, and a number of large spending actions in *Egypt* and *Morocco* on vocational education and employment. *Neighbourhood East region* spending correlates with the *EU4Youth* programmes, as well as other large education for employment programmes (e.g. *Belarus*, *Armenia*, and *Georgia*).

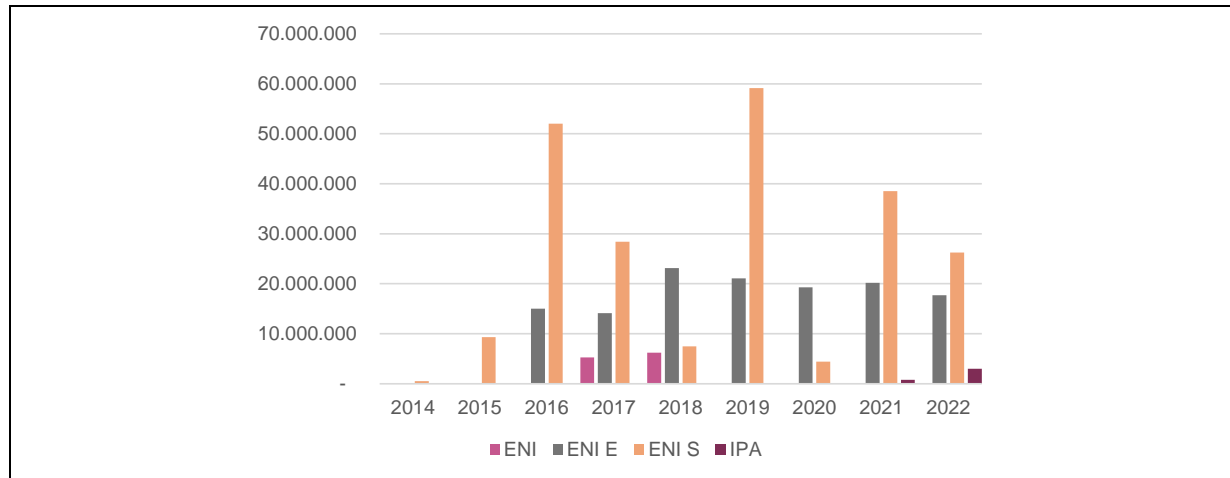
The approach of EU support to youth in the *Enlargement region* was different, where youth seemed to be a key (but not exclusive) target group of larger sector programmes. In this case, support to youth was found within bilateral sector-specific cooperation (such *Education, Employment and Social Policies Programme in Kosovo*),<sup>10</sup> mainstreamed regionally within large facilities focussing on civil society,

<sup>9</sup> These amounts are approximate figures calculated according to an internal typology developed by the evaluation team, and in the absence of a unified EU wide approach to account for contributions to youth sectors. They should be understood as illustrative rather than exact.

<sup>10</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

culture or refugee support, or within multi-country programmes, such as EU for fighting organised crime and drugs.

Figure 5 EU targeted youth actions in EURs (2014-2022)



Source: Evaluation Team

*Regional programmes produce added value and may also act as a gap filler*

Though EU support to youth areas predominantly took place at the country level, many regional programmes emerged as an important strategic tool (e.g. for reconciliation purposes). They also acted as gap-fillers targeting youth needs which would otherwise be challenging to address or prioritise within country-level cooperation. In this regard, regional programmes in the *Enlargement region* focussed on promoting youth exchange and mobility schemes and civil society dialogue on youth participation. In the *Neighbourhood East region*, regional spending was predominantly related to the *EU4Youth programme*, while regional cooperation in the *Neighbourhood South region* was focussed on youth empowerment and participation.

*Policy dialogue*

The growing prominence of youth issues in the EU, external action came with a considerable expansion of non-spending activities at various levels. EUDs engaged in policy dialogues with central governments to develop public policies and enhance capacities to address youth challenges. They also opened up new communication channels with and between young people – with the help of political sections – at both national and regional levels for different purposes (e.g. concerning programming priorities, co-creation of public policies with state agencies, EU foreign policy issues, etc.). Various forms of “*EU Ambassadors*” were promoted. At EU HQ level, there was a significant increase in non-spending activities linked to policy dialogues.

### 3.3 Intervention logic

*Logic and assumptions behind EU support to youth in the Neighbourhood and Western Balkan regions*

Ideally, strategic evaluations are based on a solid Theory of Change and underlying assumptions, which correspond to the Intervention Logic (IL) for EU support in a given domain. In the case of the present evaluation, this is not evident as the most important policy frameworks and strategies towards youth in external action were only recently elaborated and remain quite basic. They primarily highlight the importance of youth, formulating generic principles for engagement, and indicating priority areas for support. This means that it is quite difficult to reconstruct a Theory of Change and related IL for the full period 2014-2021. In order to deal with this challenge, the evaluation team integrated with the proposed IL a number of strategic policy choices of the EU (such as the empowerment of youth as a central objective), even if these were only recently adopted formally (i.e. in the 2021 Youth Action Plan).

*The importance of non-*

In the specific area of youth, non-spending activities of the EU, primarily geared at fostering various forms of dialogue between and with youth, occupy

### spending activities

**a prominent place.** These soft investments were (explicitly or implicitly) expected to yield significant benefits such as fostering trust between governments and youth actors, establishing structured dialogue opportunities allowing for meaningful voice and participation of youth, formulating (or even co-creating) genuinely owned national or regional policy frameworks towards youth, and institutionalising of good practices (e.g. in terms of co-creation of relevant policies). These dimensions and potentially positive effects must be integrated in the IL – while considering context-specific dynamics (e.g. different degrees of partner country commitment to empowering youth or divisions between youth organisations, etc.).

### Regional differences apply

While the countries covered in this evaluation share common challenges in terms of fully tapping the potential of youth, the IL (and resulting evaluation matrix) needs to **recognise regional specificities, as well as regional differences in EU partnership frameworks and engagement strategies** (e.g. the existence of accession dynamics, incentives and programming approaches in the *Western Balkans*).

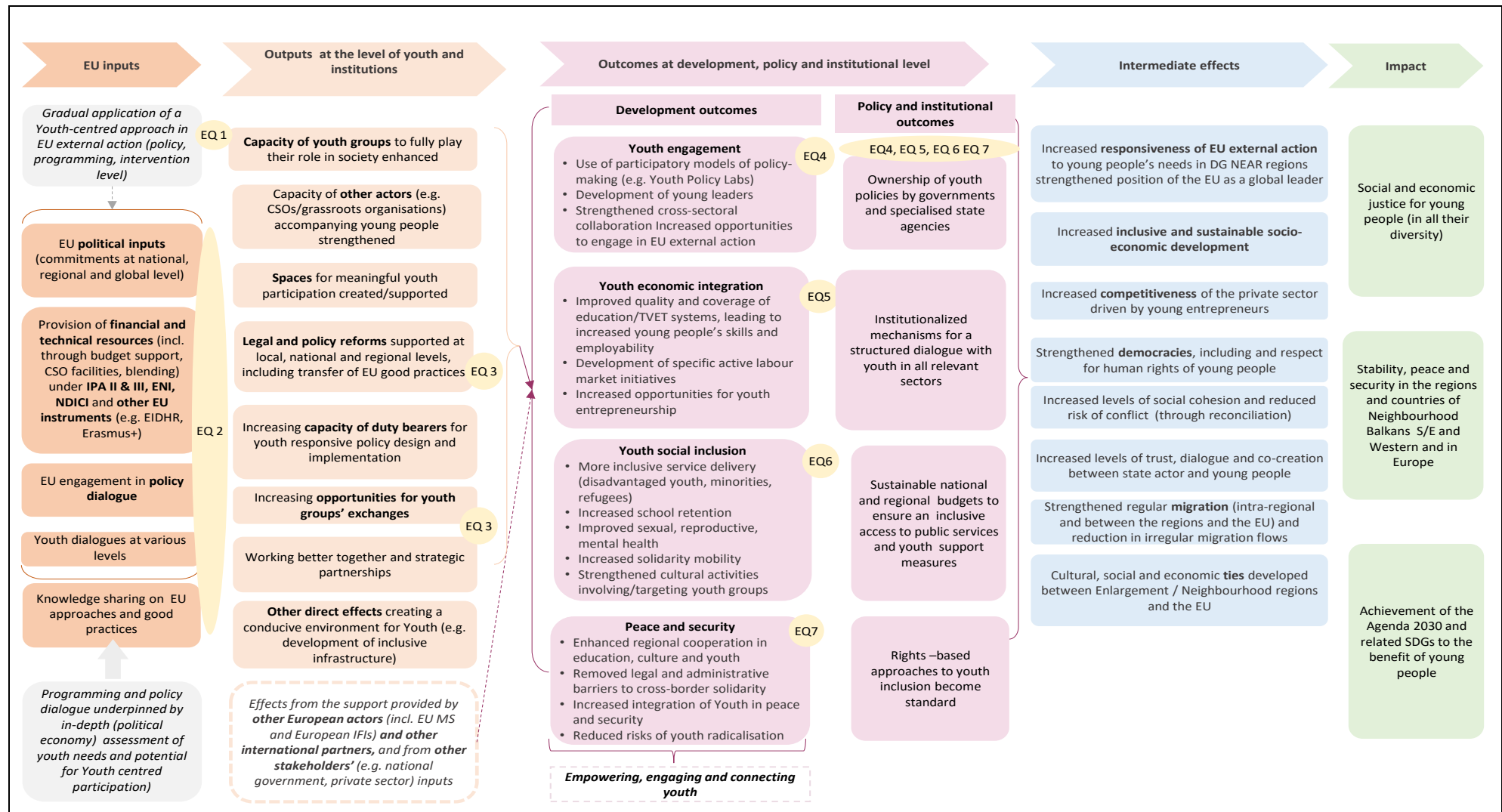
### Intervention logic and core assumptions

Building on these challenges, the IL shown in Figure 6 below provides an understanding of how EU support to youth was expected to lead to certain outputs, outcomes and, ultimately, progress towards the actual objectives in the form of impacts. The results chains that underpin the IL are based on a set of general assumptions:

- Contextual factors including the global, regional, and national contexts will, if not enable, at least not prevent progress from being made at the various levels of the Theory of Change and real-world events always modify an original logic since such events are near-unpredictable.<sup>11</sup>
- National stakeholders in partner countries (including national and local authorities) are willing to open up space for meaningful youth participation, establish relevant structures, and allocate the necessary resources to turn commitments toward youth into reality.
- The political and institutional landscape remains stable in conducive environments for youth action.
- Opportunities exist to adopt inclusive approaches by reaching out and involving marginalised/vulnerable young people.
- Enhanced EU ambitions in external action regarding youth are implemented with reasonable quality, effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence.
- Other assumptions regarding the EU include: i) adequacy and fitness for purpose of the EU external financing instruments, aid modalities and procedures, ii) an EU institutional landscape sufficiently conducive for the implementation of the planned action, iii) scope to share relevant knowledge on EU policies and practices towards youth with partner countries/regions, and iv) existence of high-level EU political commitment to integrate youth in a structured and meaningful manner into EU external action.

<sup>11</sup> Relevant examples for this evaluation include the COVID-19 crisis and resulting impact on youth (which led EUDs to revise programming and invest in rapid crisis responses) or the implications of the Russian war against Ukraine (which amongst others led to a further isolation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership framework).


Figure 6 Reconstructed intervention logic



Source: Evaluation Team

## 4 Design and delivery of EU support – main findings

### 4.1 Conducive policy frameworks for responsive programming

	<p>While generic in nature, the evolving frameworks of EU external policy, along with political and institutional incentives, have been conducive in fostering an increasingly important and structured engagement with youth across regions and partner countries during the evaluation period. However, EU engagement strategies and programming tend to display different levels of ambitions, context-sensitivity, coherence, and quality, particularly in the adoption of genuine youth-centred approaches. The EU sought to enhance knowledge and expertise on youth issues, provide relevant HQ support, and implement institutional measures to address the expanding youth agenda (e.g. by establishing youth focal points). Yet, on all these fronts, further progress is still needed. There is limited qualitative reporting on approaches used and results achieved, which reduces the scope for learning and adjustment of policies and practices.</p>
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#### 4.1.1 Responsive policy frameworks and strategies

*Engagement on youth issues has increased since 2015*

**Across regions and partner countries, the EU has expanded its engagement on youth issues, particularly since 2015-2016.** This was driven by EU internal dynamics related to youth, policy developments in EU external action, public diplomacy goals,<sup>12</sup> evolving regional and national agendas, and a sense of urgency on the need to address pressing youth challenges against a background of growing (illegal) emigration and brain drain. These push factors gradually led to shifts in EU responses and practices such as: i) the move away from a rather *ad hoc* project-related approach (targeting youth primarily as beneficiaries of specific interventions) towards more sophisticated and structured intervention strategies at both national<sup>13</sup> and regional<sup>14</sup> level, ii) EU portfolios embracing a wider range of domains (in a logic of mainstreaming), iii) experiments with applying genuine youth-centred approaches that give a real voice and agency to young people, iv) the mobilisation of an increasing amount of (dedicated) funding for addressing youth challenges over more extended periods, v) the growing involvement of political sections of the EUDs with youth actors, and vi) the search for more effective and result-oriented dialogue processes involving youth.

**These positive developments occurred *without* an overarching, comprehensive and coherent EU policy framework regarding youth in EU external action.** As mentioned above, the available policies and strategies during the evaluation period were generic in nature. They largely left it to EUDs to sort out how they would tackle youth challenges – *de facto* leading to a bottom-up “laboratory” approach applied across the board. Only in 2021 was the first comprehensive policy framework adopted, i.e. the EU Youth Action Plan for external action.

*The quality and coherence of EU engagement strategies with youth varies*

**While youth issues are increasingly on the radar in EU programming in all partner countries covered by this evaluation, actual EU strategic responses to engaging with youth differ widely.** This diversity is linked to several factors, including contextual constraints (e.g. restrictive/fragile settings), limited domestic ownership of youth agendas,<sup>15</sup> as well as internal limitations of EUDs (lack of political support, shortage of human resources and funding, etc.). Based on

<sup>12</sup> The new regulations on the MFF 2021-2027 and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe/NDICI-GE instrument clearly emphasise the critical importance for the EU – as a geopolitical actor – to engage more and in a smarter way in public diplomacy to defend EU values and interests. Youth actors in partner countries (particularly in accession countries or candidates) are seen as a key target group of public diplomacy.

<sup>13</sup> An example is the EU “Partnership for Youth” concluded with Tunisia in 2016 which paved the way for a EUR 60 million flagship initiative.

<sup>14</sup> Particularly in the Eastern Partnership, the regional dimension has been prominent, mainly through the multi-dimensional EU4Youth program, now in its fourth phase.

<sup>15</sup> The EUD in Serbia reported that in the Instrument for Pre-Accession/IPA region interventions through regular programmes can only happen when the Ministries involved express a clear demand. In Serbia there is a dedicated youth strategy and action plan, including budgets to support local councils and municipalities on youth matters. Yet the Ministry is not pro-active or committed to engage with EU in strategic reforms.

*substantially*

consultations with EUDs, four broad (partly overlapping) types of strategic approaches could be identified:

- The first scenario relates to **EUDs that have made an explicit strategic choice to prioritise youth**, elaborate a coherent vision, and promote its mainstreaming as a cross-cutting issue in a broad spectrum of policy areas, possibly complemented with dedicated youth programmes (e.g. *Türkiye, Morocco*).
- In other EUDs, **youth is a relative political priority** (amongst many others), and **there is no explicit, coherent, and formalised strategic framework to engage with youth**. In practice, this generally leads to a de facto build-up of a diversified but fragmented youth portfolio spread over different sectors and units. Yet the various youth initiatives largely exist independently without an overarching narrative and a formal coordination mechanism within the EUD aimed at connecting the dots and optimally exploiting synergies (e.g. *Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tunisia, Kosovo*).<sup>16</sup>
- There are also **EUDs which have not retained youth as a political priority**. Logically, this tends to generate a somewhat limited EU portfolio, often focussing on a few dedicated programmes – to be complemented by regional programmes managed by HQ (e.g. *Jordan*). They have no broader ambitions to invest more in youth (e.g. *North Macedonia, Montenegro*), inter alia, because this is seen as “*too ambitious an objective considering available capacities and budgets*”.
- A fourth scenario relates to **EUDs that operate in highly restrictive, fragile, or conflict-ridden environments**. In such situations, **EUDs do not necessarily have an explicit and formalised strategy**. Yet, they **tend to be committed to reaching out to young people** (despite all the obstacles) by creatively and optimally exploiting the available spaces and windows of opportunity (e.g. *Algeria, Palestine,<sup>17</sup> and Syria*).

*The EU has tried, with mixed success, to take into account national and regional specificities*

In order to effectively operationalise growing ambitions towards youth, important efforts were made by the EU/EUDs to better understand and address evolving challenges affecting diverse categories of young people taking into account national and regional specificities. Overall, one can observe a stronger integration of youth issues in EU analytical reports and strategy documents, as well as more responsive and realistic programming in line with the real needs of young people. However, evidence collected also shows that EU engagement strategies do not always sufficiently consider the obstacles to the effective implementation of youth initiatives, particularly those related to governance and administrative realities, to situations of fragility/conflict (e.g. *Bosnia and Herzegovina*) or to the complex arena of youth structures and organisations. The levels of differentiation could be enhanced in the EU's response strategies, particularly at the regional level. A case in point is the EU4Youth programme in the *Neighbourhood East region*. While stakeholders recognise the overall relevance of the programme (e.g. in addressing common challenges affecting all countries of the region or in terms of its comprehensive nature), several EUD interlocutors indicated that the flagship initiative does not sufficiently consider the hugely diverging realities and needs of the various countries involved.<sup>18</sup> This calls for more customised approaches in rolling out operationally interventions supported under EU4Youth. In bilateral portfolios, important gaps may appear regarding EU responses to specific youth challenges that are pressing in a given context. In *Georgia*, for instance, the EU is not involved in youth political activism and youth engagement in peace and security. This choice is linked to political economy considerations, including the extreme

<sup>16</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

<sup>17</sup> This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

<sup>18</sup> Some even expressed doubts that such a regional programme still makes sense in the current context – with the war in Ukraine, the authoritarian backsliding in Belarus and the re-ignited conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

politicisation of youth by the Government of Georgia and the de facto authorities in the breakaway regions.

The youth survey was a bit more critical on this issue. Particularly youth testimonies from the *Neighbourhood East region* (three out of four contributions) stressed that existing EU support did not fully meet the shifting political, economic, and social needs, with a need for more government involvement, ownership, and enhancing the initiative's sustainability.

*EU is flexible in its approach to supporting youth areas*

**Evidence suggests that there is quite some flexibility in programming support to youth.** Several EUDs sought to integrate new youth challenges linked to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. In complex environments characterised by political crises and closing civic space (e.g. *Belarus*), the EUD explored alternatives to support young people – even if several larger programmes had to be discontinued. In more stable countries, there are many examples of programmes that integrate lessons learned and flexibly rethink the focus and institutional set-up of support. An interesting case is provided by the EUD *Algeria*, where the scope for applying genuine youth-centred approaches was very limited. The centralised governance system tended to privilege institutional programmes for young people designed, executed, and controlled by the government. Dissatisfied with the limited direct benefits for young people generated by such programmes, the EUD successfully advocated for the adoption of an innovative approach in a sector with potential for the involvement/employment of young people (local level tourism and related value chains). The resulting EUR 10 million programme called *JIL-SIHAYA* sought to fully involve young people to be empowered as well-informed and entrepreneurial actors and involved in design and implementation of local-level initiatives. The key expected outcome was to ensure *direct* benefits to young people.

#### 4.1.2 Enabling institutional environment

*Incentives exist to engage with youth in a structured manner, yet genuine youth-centred approaches are still limited*

**Political and institutional incentives for a strategic EU engagement with youth increased over the past years.** This is exemplified by: i) the evolving discourse on “*why and how to engage with youth*”,<sup>19</sup> ii) the high-level political and managerial support formally expressed at DG NEAR level for the youth agenda, iii) the increased visibility of youth in various external action processes/dialogues, and iv) more substantial and diverse programmatic choices in country and regional multi-annual indicative programmes. However, two caveats must be mentioned. First, several EU interviewees pointed out that the political commitment to engage strategically and structurally with youth is not necessarily strong at the higher decision-making levels of DG NEAR. The discourse is there, but action seems primarily to focus on visibility concerns and high-profile events. This is corroborated by testimonies from EU stakeholders in the e-survey, with several respondents pointing to the “*nominal commitment to youth not matched with adequate funding*”. Second, the existence of generic political and institutional incentives does not mean that more could not be done at the partner country level by EUDs to incentivise the various actors (see Box 2).

#### Box 2 Optimising the use of incentives: lessons from Georgia

The *Georgia* case study report contains valuable insights on the issue of political and institutional incentives. The overall message is that more could be done by the EUD to identify relevant incentives for particular policy dealing with youth. According to the Country Strategy evaluation (2022), budget support was identified as the most effective way to incentivise the government if smart conditions/performance indicators regarding youth can be included.<sup>20</sup> Capacity development and future grant schemes could provide suitable incentives for civil society to engage more and better with youth from an empowerment perspective. Joint programming could incentivise EU Member States to be more pro-active in adopting youth-centred approaches. On all these dimensions of incentives, there is scope for improvement for greater relevance and impact.

<sup>19</sup> Though several interlocutors stressed the fact that some narratives within EU circles are still primarily based on seeing youth as a “*threat*” rather than an “*opportunity*” – particularly in terms of migration.

<sup>20</sup> EU (2022): Georgia Country Strategic Evaluation (2014-2020).

*Spillover between internal and external EU policies is taking place, though with limitations*

There is ample evidence of **spill-over effects between evolving internal EU policies towards youth and external action rolled out by EUDs in their respective settings**. This cross-fertilisation can be observed in i) converging narratives on EU youth engagement, and ii) the growing use of tested European models and approaches to support youth in external action (e.g. the Youth Guarantee scheme) as well as the deepening of partnerships with the Council of Europe<sup>21</sup> or specialised EU agencies such as the Turin-based European Training Foundation/ETF.<sup>22</sup>

An interesting test case for the cross-fertilisation between internal and external EU approaches towards youth is the extent to which EUDs and related implementing agencies (can) adopt genuine “*youth-centred approaches*” whereby young people are seen as actors and “*rights-holders*” – rather than merely as target groups and beneficiaries. This concept – a cornerstone of the EU Youth Action Plan – is already quite embedded and used in EU initiatives towards youth within Europe. **Yet, the effective application of this approach appears to be still in its infancy** in the countries and regions covered by this evaluation. Most of the EU initiatives, programmes, and projects reviewed primarily seek to set up activities for young people (as target groups/beneficiaries), much less *with* and *by* youth. Yet genuine youth-centred interventions require more than traditional forms of participation (see Box 3).

### Box 3 Core ingredients of youth-centred approaches

The adoption of such a methodology implies:

- A *shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches* – aimed at creating space for youth actors to set their own agendas and determine priorities.
- The *use of methodologies that facilitate the “co-creation” and “co-management”* of youth policies and programmes.
- *Structured and iterative forms of dialogue* with youth to take stock of core expectations as well as progress achieved to adjust, if needed, the support provided.
- The *willingness to work and fund directly* relevant *youth structures* in implementation processes.
- A *focus on empowering young people* to assume roles and responsibilities.

*Youth are consulted, but have limited influence on decision-making*

**The majority of the programmes reviewed have not yet integrated these core ingredients in a consistent manner.** While youth structures and actors tend to be consulted in programming support strategies, they have limited influence on final decisions. There are few instances where space exists for co-creation or co-management with partner countries (see Box 4).

Implementing agencies often act top-down, treating youth as target group rather than full-fledged actor. Only in a limited number of cases could youth structures enjoy direct funding to pursue their agendas and priorities. There are several reasons for this still timid application of youth-centred approaches, including: i) the relative novelty of structured work on youth in EU external action, ii) the reluctance of partner countries to empower youth (preferring top-down, instrumental, and control-oriented methods), iii) governance, institutional and capacity weaknesses affecting youth organisations, and iv) the heavy EU reliance on implementing agencies -some of operate in a traditional top-down manner or lack the expertise to apply youth-centred approaches (see further under section 4.2).

In the Youth survey, several testimonies, particularly from the Western Balkans and Neighbourhood East, make the point that EUDs often prefer large international or capital-based civil society organisations as implementing agencies. In their view, many of these CSOs have limited real experience on youth issues, consider young

<sup>21</sup> See case study Georgia.

<sup>22</sup> This agency is mandated to help transition/developing countries harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training, and labour market systems (covering all countries involved in this evaluation except Libya, Syria and Belarus). Building on the European Pillar of Social Rights, it provides critical assistance to EU external action (DG NEAR, EUDs, DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs/DG GROW, etc.) as a knowledge institution, using evidence-based and conflict-sensitive methodologies. This is appreciated by stakeholders interviewed, particularly in terms of fostering country ownership for reforms and engaging over a longer period.

people as beneficiaries and tend to be costly structures (reducing the funding available for bottom-up youth agendas).

#### Box 4 Testing youth centred approaches

Several EU-supported activities display core ingredients of genuine youth-centred approaches, including the following:

- The Youth Labs in the *Western Balkans* managed to let the choice of priority topics to youth actors involved.
- In the context of the Youth Guarantee in the *Western Balkans*, young people Not in Employment, Education or Trainings/NEETs are considered as “rights- holders” entitled to receive a quality education, employment or training offer.
- The Anna Lindh Foundation/ALF working in the *Neighbourhood South region* has recently reviewed its overall intervention logic to empower diverse categories of youth actors to meaningfully participate in policy processes with specialist knowledge and expertise. It has also created a Youth Board to co-determine the management of Anna Lindh foundation/ALF’s youth programmes as well as the future course of the institute.
- Despite the restrictive environment, the EUD in *Algeria* has managed to create space for youth actors to express voice and assume agency/entrepreneurship in local their voices and agency/entrepreneurship in local-level tourism development.
- In *Palestine*, a “Youth Advisory Panel” was installed in 2021 (with the help of the United Nations Population Fund/UNFPA) of an inclusive nature, consisting of 17 members selected following national calls, coming from various backgrounds (marginalised locations, disabled people, refugees). The members are empowered to engage with state actors and external agencies and reach out to youth in communities to connect them with civil society and other key stakeholders.
- In *Tunisia*, an intervention geared at involving youth in culture and sports, implemented by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation/AECID and the British Council, developed an extensive consultation process with the youth for the design of the programme.

*The expanding ambitions are not in line with overall institutional capacities*

**In response to the higher political profile of the youth agenda, the EU (Delegations and Headquarters) explored ways and means to adapt their institutional set-up and capacities for effective delivery with mixed success.** One important change was the establishment of youth focal points, which are now active in the large majority of EUDs covered by this evaluation as well as in DG NEAR (i.e. in each regional unit and in the communication service). On paper, their core mandate is to build connections and synergies between the (often fragmented) youth interventions in different sectors and themes within the EUD, enhance overall coherence and push for further mainstreaming. As this is the case with other focal points (e.g. on gender or human rights), evidence gathered suggests that their effectiveness and impact depend on EUD-specific conditions such as: i) the political support provided by Heads of Delegation and Heads of Cooperation, ii) the overall collaborative culture in the EUD, and iii) the energy and skills of the focal point itself, including time available to perform this function. The fact that there are no targets for youth (as these exist for gender) may also hamper their effectiveness. The case studies corroborate the challenges experienced by youth focal points if these are in place (see Box 5). Similar evidence comes out of the EU survey. Being a Youth Focal Point (formally or informally) does not necessarily mean that more than 30% of the working time is dedicated to Youth-related interventions. Nine out of 23 formal and informal Youth Focal Points spent less than 30% of their time on these interventions, while eight spent between 30% and 70% and six spent more than 70% (Figure 7).

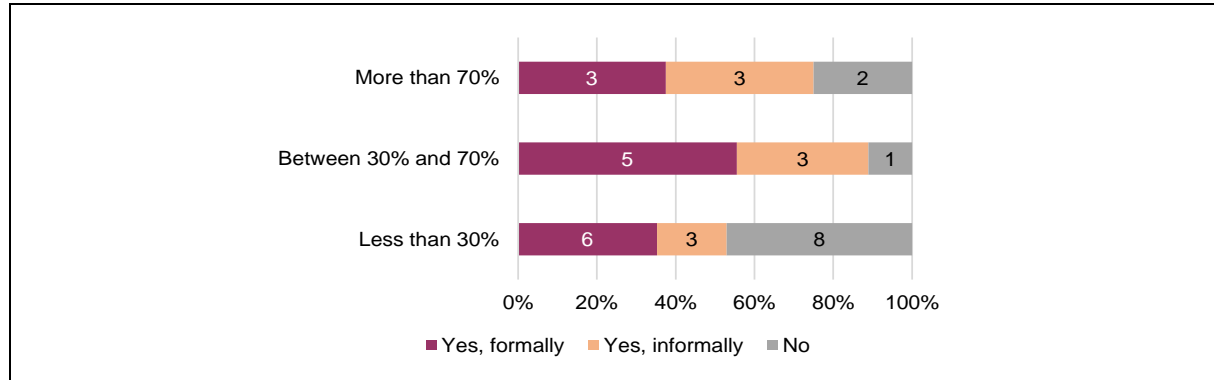
#### Box 5 The complex task of youth focal points: evidence from the case studies

- In *Bosnia and Herzegovina* there is no dedicated focal point covering the youth portfolio. This contributes to the fragmentation of youth-specific responses (distributed over different managers with sector portfolios) and to missing opportunities for more integrated and comprehensive interventions.
- In *Georgia* there has been a dedicated youth focal point throughout the evaluation period. However, the same person oversees multiple functions, including being the M&E focal point. Recently one of the (three) project managers involved with youth matters (with the most important portfolio) has been appointed as the new EUD focal point for youth – a move which holds potential for greater complementarity and coherence. The link with the regional programme (EU4Youth) is less clear.
- In *Türkiye*, a youth focal point and a dormant informal youth group are in place. However, these structures et to create a robust environment for consistent and prominent youth-centred programming. The focal

point is not a programme person – which reduces its outreach and influence – while the informal group seldom meets.

- In *Tunisia*, the EUD focal point coordinates with the various sections to monitor results under the EU4Youth programme and other interventions targeting youth and facilitate the inclusion of youth in initiatives like the EU Coffee Talks. However, synergies between interventions need to be strengthened and developed more formally, under the advice and guidance of the EU focal point, to enhance EUD's institutional response towards youth in Tunisia.

Figure 7 Being a Youth Focal Point vs time dedicated to Youth-related Interventions.



Sources: Evaluation Team

*EU invested in institutional adaptations to address youth challenges with mixed success*


**Addressing youth challenges in a structured manner requires new capacities, knowledge, systems and processes. The EU has invested in such institutional adaptations to cope with an expanding youth agenda with mixed success.** Examples include:

- **The needs for knowledge and expertise could partially be met by the involvement of other DGs** (DG for Education and Culture/EAC, DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs/DG GROW) and resource centres (e.g. Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities/SALTO, European Training Foundation/ETF).
- **The organisational support by DG NEAR to EUDs is generally considered positive, despite structural limitations in staff** (e.g. there is only one person in DG NEAR who is horizontally in charge of youth while also being the thematic officer for social protection and employment). In this context, the role of the (small) thematic support and socio-economic development in DG NEAR (unit A3) has to be mentioned. The unit works together with other DGs and EUDs to exercise high-level leverage on partner countries to adopt structural reforms towards youth. Evidence also suggests that DG NEAR lacks the time and resources to optimally play some critical steering and strategic roles regarding youth engagement strategies, particularly in HQ.
- **The EU has increasingly invested in producing relevant data and a wide range of analyses on (evolving) youth challenges.** However, there is scarce evidence that EUDs also engaged in full-fledged political economy analyses (focussing on power relations, actor interests and incentives, sources of leverage, and resistance to change) to underpin programming or concrete interventions on youth. The nature of the analyses used is more global and focussed on overall context analysis or specific challenges (e.g. the openness to change or the institutional weaknesses of partner governments). Still, the four case studies conclude that most of the EU interventions are realistic in design.
- **The overall division of responsibilities within EUDs regarding youth issues also showed important variations.** In some EUDs, the Heads of Delegation and the political section assumed an active and systematic role in the overall engagement strategies towards youth, based on a clear rationale for doing so (e.g. *Algeria*). In most EUDs, the support of the political actors appeared to be more of an ad hoc nature and driven by specific events or visibility concerns.

*Limited M&E on outcomes and transformative results achieved*

Interesting examples of youth programmes developing M&E systems that adequately document achievements (e.g. EU4Youth in the Neighbourhood East region) were found. However, most programmes reviewed have quite basic M&E systems, reporting mainly on activities and progress achieved on a number of indicators mainly focussed on (quantitative) outputs, at best disaggregated (e.g. gender, age, social status). The *Bosnia and Herzegovina* report notes there is a lack of consistent programme-level reporting. Part of the problem resides in the inconsistent demands towards implementing agencies in terms of providing M&E. Several interviewees acknowledged that it is challenging to monitor and evaluate results achieved with youth interventions properly. Systemic impact in youth-related support is highly dependent on the context and willingness of governments to engage in structural/integrated reforms at policy level. As one interviewee put it: “at the end of the day, larger impact depends on central government assuming political leadership (beyond often weak ministries of youth) and ensuring the required fiscal policies and budgets for youth”.<sup>23</sup> The EU4Youth in the *Neighbourhood East region* has documented its successes in yearly Achievement Reports. The reports provide abundant evidence of what has been done (outputs) and gains obtained, particularly by young people involved (with detailed quantitative data).<sup>24</sup> However, stakeholders who were consulted recognise that it has proven challenging to provide deeper qualitative analysis on outcomes and, even more so, transformational changes.<sup>25</sup>

## 4.2 EU delivery methods, funding channels and instruments

	<p>A mix of EU delivery methods, instruments and funding channels were used to engage with youth. In a limited number of partner countries, EUDs have chosen budget support to address youth issues. Budget support was underpinned by relatively solid analyses, responsive to context and needs, and generally led to adequately designed interventions with relevant indicators. However, the performance levels of policy dialogue and their effects on national reforms were mixed. Decision-making processes concerning the most suitable (mix of) delivery methods, including the selection of implementing agencies capable of operating in a youth-centred manner, were not always clear. There is limited evidence that EUDs consulted youth actors in the actual design of interventions. Effective synergies and complementarities could be noted between various youth interventions within EU portfolios, as well as with EU Member States and other donors. However, examples of overlapping or disconnected initiatives could also be observed. Overall, the EU demonstrated flexibility in addressing youth issues, but the cost-effectiveness of interventions yielded mixed results.</p>
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### 4.2.1 Responsiveness of EU modalities

*The EU uses various delivery methods to support youth actions, including budget support*

**EU youth support (both targeted and through sector-specific interventions) was provided through a mix of implementation modalities, instruments and funding channels.** The types of support include grants and service contracts to a range of implementing partners under sector programmes or specific instruments such as the Civil Society Facility, EIDHR, Jean Monnet, Erasmus+, or cross-border cooperation/CBC. Documentary analysis suggests that indirect management (particularly delegation agreements) is a preferred delivery method for EU support to youth.<sup>26</sup> **The use of budget support to address youth issues is a recent evolution** in the countries covered by the evaluation.<sup>27</sup> A review of available documentation regarding budget support operations on youth in three countries (*Tunisia, Georgia and North Macedonia*) suggests that the choice for this specific

<sup>23</sup> Source: Interview with European Commission official in DG NEAR.

<sup>24</sup> Source: Regional case study.

<sup>25</sup> Source : Documentary analysis of EY4YOUTH reporting as well as interviews with actors involved.

<sup>26</sup> The direct management approach of large grants, centrally from DG NEAR headquarters, has proven challenging in the case of the EU4Youth programme. It requires substantial contract management work, which meant that the limited human resources in DG NEAR could not be used for more policy-oriented work or play an effective role in policy dialogue processes (a task which EUDs do not necessarily assume and one which cannot be delegated to implementing agencies (Source: interviews with EU official).

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that in quite a number of countries covered by the evaluation, the EU does not provide any budget support, either because the conditions are not present or because the partner country is not interested (e.g. Türkiye).

modality was responsive to opportunities at the country level to advance particular, well-chosen youth agendas. The various budget support schemes examined are, overall, based on analyses, oriented towards supporting reforms and followed by coherent measures to foster policy dialogue. **Effectiveness levels appear mixed** for various reasons, including over-optimistic design choices or governance/capacity issues on the side of the government.

**Box 6** *Mixed track record with budget support for youth*

The experiences of three EUDs having tested out this modality are summarised below:

- In *Georgia*, the budget support geared toward VET<sup>28</sup> did not adequately consider prevailing cultural norms and realities. According to the last country strategic evaluation/CSE of the EU cooperation with Georgia<sup>29</sup>, *“despite VET improvements, the actual number of persons enrolled has failed to increase”* due to multiple reasons, including low regard for VET among young people related to Georgia’s historical experience and young people’s perceptions about the post-VET career prospects. When it comes to the VET interventions in breakaway regions, they are accompanied by rudimentary situation analysis sections that are focussed on the ability of the partners to implement projects in difficult political and security situations; they do not delve into the different drivers or levels of conflict or consider possible (positive) impact these interventions could have on bringing together youth from both sides of the conflict divide.<sup>30</sup>
- In *Tunisia*, the budget support contract under *Programme d’appui à l’éducation, la mobilité, la recherche et l’innovation en Tunisie/EMORI* outlined good analysis of the political context in Tunisia, designed tranches to push forward the dialogue on the education reform, and provided complementary support measures and relevant indicators. Nonetheless, according to the interviews conducted, political and institutional instability in the country did not facilitate the achievement of reforms. Furthermore, the strength and leverage of the policy/political dialogue on youth issues has diminished in recent years with the return to authoritarian rule.
- In *North Macedonia*, the EU4Youth budget support represented the first use of this modality endowed with EUR 15 million and EUR 1.5 million technical assistance. The sector budget support included policy dialogue, underpinned by four indicators (out of eight) focussing on the effective implementation of the youth guarantee. According to the EUD staff in charge, the programme on youth guarantees is progressing well, with good progress on the indicators (which were not too ambitious). The second component of the sector budget support (focussed on education and regional VET centres) was more problematic (due to overambitious targets). The main bottleneck is the weak institutional set-up in the Ministry of Education (reflected in limited ownership among high-level management for sector budget support/SBS and capacity challenges to cope with budget support as well as technical assistance facilities).

*Decision-making processes for selecting implementation modalities for supporting youth issues are often unclear*

**The rationale, assessment tools and decision-making processes behind identifying suitable (mix of) implementation modalities are often unclear.** This held particularly true for the selection of implementing agencies when the EU opts for delegation agreements. The Action Documents generally referred to the (assumed) delivery capacities of the type of organisations, yet do not provide much information on how this assessment was made.<sup>31</sup> There is **seldom a comparative analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of different delivery methods** (e.g. delegation agreements to a Member State or other pillar-tested organisation<sup>32</sup> versus competitive tendering open to private/specialised youth agencies). In this context, concerns have been raised that applying a Team Europe logic in youth interventions may end up privileging agencies from Member States without

<sup>28</sup> EU (2020): Evaluation of EU’s cooperation with Georgia (2014-2020).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> A notable exception being the ACF reference in the Action Document for Skills Development and Matching for Labour Market Needs: *“ACF is also able to integrate a confidence building component where ethnic Abkhaz, Georgian, Armenian, Russian, and other minorities establish linkages and networking within Georgia’s breakaway region of Abkhazia.”*

<sup>31</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the review of the sampled projects shows that in one instance (under the IPA II Bosnia and Herzegovina and Herzegovina, Local Development Strategic Action) the selection involved the German International Development Agency/GIZ, as an EU Member State taking the coordinator role, while the International Labour Organisation/ILO and UNDP engaged as the implementing partners. Yet there was no clear explanation why this format was chosen and what guarantees this provided for delivering effective youth-centred interventions.

<sup>32</sup> There is quite some evidence from other EU evaluations that this delivery method can be challenging and less than effective. In the present evaluation, the draft case study Tunisia argues that this modality has reached its limits in the prevailing country context. Evidence shows that resorting too often to this delivery method hinders programme quality, due, partly, to absorption issues and lack of specialised expertise related to youth of the implementing agencies themselves.

guaranteeing that they have the required expertise to engage with youth using suitable methodologies.<sup>33</sup>

*The EU is sensitive to youth concerns, but the integration of their specific needs into EU modalities and funding channels remains unclear and often limited*

**A review of project documents confirmed some level of EU sensitivity to youth-specific concerns,** demands and expectations expressed during consultative processes.<sup>34</sup> **However, the extent to which these were effectively integrated into EU modalities and funding channels is not clear.** The two surveys realised in the framework of this evaluation provide insights into how different stakeholders perceive the adequacy of the prevailing mix of implementation modalities, funding channels and procedures used to reach out to youth and their diverse organisational structures and organisations. Youth organisations largely converged on two major weaknesses in delivery methods: i) the heavy EU reliance on intermediary structures for implementation (often reducing the agency of youth structures), and ii) the constraints experienced to access direct funding, particularly when smaller, less structured organisations seek to obtain EU funding.

*Synergies exist but there is much scope for improvement, particularly with regional programmes*

**A mixed track record was noted regarding synergies between various strands of the EU youth portfolio** (all instruments combined). At the country level, several programming documents provide a comprehensive overview of other interventions, touching directly or indirectly on youth<sup>35</sup> and formulate the ambition to actively look for synergies<sup>36</sup> with varying levels of success.<sup>37</sup> Some cross-border initiatives also commit themselves to fostering collaboration with other interventions. At the same time, the link with regional programmes addressing youth issues is generally more tenuous, with notable exceptions.<sup>38</sup> There is limited (monitoring and evaluation) evidence on how these commitments to act in a complementary way was effectively translated into practice. Evidence suggests that complementarities and synergies are easier achieved when: i) the EUD has a focal point youth, ii) various implementing agencies are prepared to collaborate, iii) the EU supports actions that run for some time with a strong monitoring-evaluation-accountability and learning component, and iv) the intervention area can rely on strong (local) CSOs.<sup>39</sup> The delegation of implementation responsibilities can hinder effective synergies as those in charge logically do not see it as the core business and may have different institutional incentives (e.g. to promote their own agendas or visibility). This may happen even within the EU family, as illustrated by EU4Youth in the *Neighbourhood East region* where the small grant capacity-building component was delegated to European Education and Culture Executive

<sup>33</sup> This point was raised primarily by specialised organisations whose core mandate is to engage with youth. They stressed the critical importance to having proven direct experience of engaging with youth over a longer period of time as well as of having experimented different methodologies (e.g. on how to have a meaningful, inclusive and result-oriented dialogue with youth) leading to learning and refinement of methodologies used. These assets are arguably not found in Member State agencies, most UN bodies or private contractors.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, within the Youth Retention Programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina – “General Mobilisation Project where a Youth Expert Network was established and consulted on further project developments. See ANNEX VI Interim Narrative Report; p.2. Furthermore, in Türkiye, numerous events have been targeting the youth, organised by the EU Information Centres Network. It is unclear from the reviewed documents to what extent such feedback and inputs from the youth have been used to inform the implementation modalities and channels.

<sup>35</sup> The Facility for Refugees in Türkiye/FRIT DoA on Social and Economic Cohesion through Vocational Education – II presents an analysis of other EU (or other donor) interventions and connecting points or synergies between the action and those other initiatives.

<sup>36</sup> The EU4Private sector development in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Herzegovina (post COVID-19) activity notified that its grant support would be synchronised with the Youth Guarantee Facility as well as with ongoing and planned programmes aimed at youth and women entrepreneurship (including through the channel of the diaspora).

<sup>37</sup> Documentary review shows that the EU support has strengthened both the SME sector and VET. However, according to the recent Georgia Country Strategic Evaluation, “EUD staff interviewed expressed the view that potential linkages between SME development and VET, where two budget support programmes ran on in parallel, were insufficiently exploited” (p. 9). Similarly, “experts interviewed specifically identified EU support for VET and SME development as a nexus where the potential for synergy had been missed” (EU (2020): Evaluation of EU’s cooperation with Georgia 2014-2020, p. 10).

<sup>38</sup> According to reviewed EU reports and programming documents, there were intensive efforts in the Western Balkans to ensure complementarities between national and regions multicounty instruments mainly in the areas of civil society with Civil Society Facility, cooperation with the Council of Europe (horizontal facility) and Roma integration programmes (Roma 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Source: global interviews and case studies.

Agency (as a specialised EU agency). Exchanges with DG NEAR on what was done highlighted that the effectiveness/efficiency of the more than 100 grants proved limited.<sup>40</sup> On the whole, there are different views among EUDs on how a major flagship initiative like EU4Youth has been rolled out (see Box 7).

**Box 7** *EUD's perspective on the relevance and effectiveness of the regional EU4Youth programme*

How did a multi-dimensional regional flagship programme such as *EU4Youth* in the *Neighbourhood East region* (initiated in 2018 with a focus on youth employment and entrepreneurship) land in the EUDs and partner countries in practice? What value did it add to bilateral processes involving youth? Different views were collected on the subject through stakeholder consultations with EUDs and other actors, which can be summarised as follows:

- There is limited knowledge among EUD actors engaged in youth on what *EU4Youth* does concretely in practice (one EUD even called it “a mystery”). It is often seen as a HQ-driven programme that primarily exists on its own despite efforts of dedicated officials in HQ and the field to communicate about the programme and show achievements in accessible reports.
- Despite limited integration in bilateral portfolios, the stakeholders interviewed saw many positive effects in the regional programmes supported. Different groups young people were exposed to new ideas and peers from various places when they participated in dialogue processes. The *Youth Labs* were an important component of *EU4Youth* and were geared to empower youth to engage in policy processes. They are appreciated differently (also in function to the degree of participation of the EUDs). Key challenges identified included the continuity of interlocutors on the government side, the absorption capacity of state agencies, and the possibility of ensuring a proper and result-oriented follow-up to the dialogue processes (which required capable facilitators).
- Despite a dedicated and professional M&E unit attached to the *EU4Youth programme*, EUDs struggled to track the grants provided and their effects overtime.
- Overall, there is quite a shared perception that there is not enough differentiation in rolling out the programme. The agenda proposed by the EU was often based on “the lowest common denominator” without sufficiently factoring in the huge differences between countries and youth challenges. Other regional programmes (e.g. *EU4Culture*, *EU4 Gender*) are perceived to have been more successful at customisation.
- There was also a risk of transplanting models (the *Youth Guarantee* was often given as an example) that are ill-suited for the governance and socio-economic realities of the country – instead of flexibly aligning to the specific youth developments and demands for support in a given context).
- The new phase of *EU4Youth* seeks to overcome some of these challenges identified in the first years of operation (see Volume III Annex 1: Regional Case Study).

#### 4.2.2 Flexibility of instruments and delivery tools

*Evidence of the flexibility of the EU in youth-related interventions*

**There is evidence that the EU has been able to flexibly and timely adjust its mix of financing instruments and delivery methods to the changing conditions, opportunities or backlashes affecting youth empowerment.** The COVID-19 pandemic was, in all partner countries, the key “disruptor”, and there is abundant evidence that EUDs across the board reacted creatively to the crisis in general and in alleviating new youth challenges. In particular,<sup>41</sup> they used various mitigation measures, adaptations to implementation, and no-cost extensions.<sup>42</sup> There are also indications that EUDs reacted flexibly and *timely* regarding major political changes or limitations (e.g. *Belarus*, *Ukraine*, *Egypt*)<sup>43</sup> or to resource /capacity limitations (several EUDs in the *Western Balkans*). There is also evidence on the significant limitations experienced by EUDs in applying flexible

<sup>40</sup> Source: interviews with European Commission officials and implementing agencies.

<sup>41</sup> In Georgia, evidence was collected on examples of EU flexibility in terms of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as funding new CSO interventions to alleviate the pandemic-related burden for vulnerable groups, such as PWDs, LGBTIQ community, internally displaced persons, children, and elderly. In Tunisia, EU programming was responsive enough to the COVID-19 crisis. Based on a review of 2020 and 2021 internal EU reporting, the EUD has redirected a number of activities under ongoing programmes to meet the needs of the youth population during COVID-19, in particular an emergency fund to support the cultural sector (within the programme *Appui au renforcement du secteur culturel tunisien/TFANEN-Tunisie creative*) and an urgency solidarity fund for youth initiatives in the social and solidarity economy sector (within the *Programme d'appui à la jeunesse/JEUN'ESS*).

<sup>42</sup> The unprecedented and tested levels of flexibility due to the COVID-19 pandemic, lead to demands to consider this approach for non-emergency situations as well, given that there were some very positive results achieved (Source: different interviews).

<sup>43</sup> Source: interviews with EUD officials

programming of youth interventions. In the Tunisia case, documentary reviews<sup>44</sup> indicate major limitations to the use of existing delivery methods (delegation agreements, private sector contractors) to provide rapid and proportionate support to small/medium actions “outside the box”.

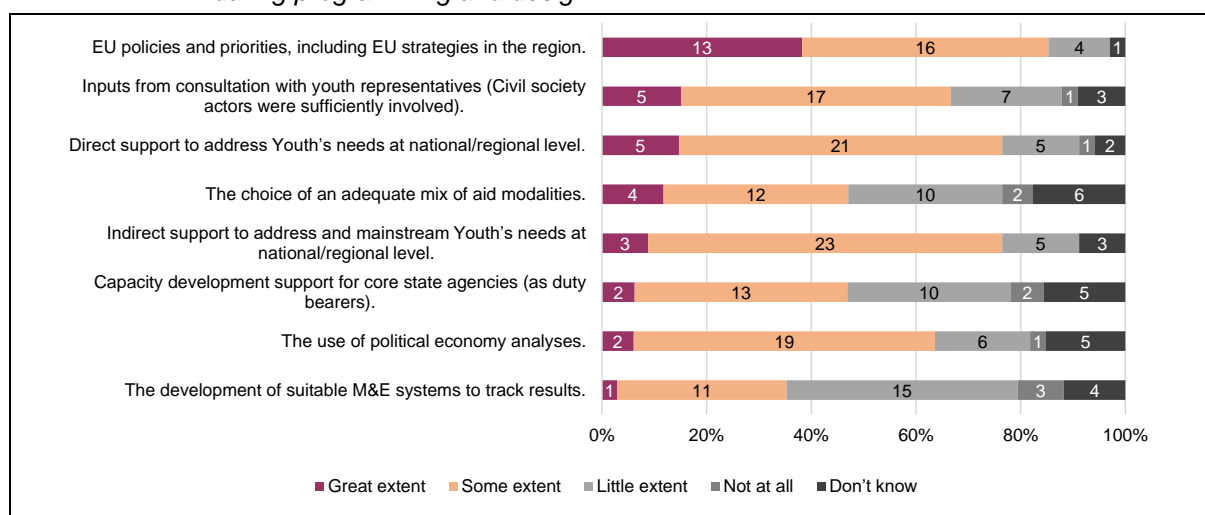
*The cost-effectiveness of EU-supported initiatives is mixed*

**Emerging evidence on the cost-effectiveness of EU-supported youth initiatives across the board is also mixed.** In generic terms, support often appears to be relevant, flexible and efficient. Cases in point are the EU-funded interventions in *Bosnia and Herzegovina's*: i) Support to *Local Employment Partnerships/LEP – Phase II*, ii) Facilitation of Academic Exchange Lot 3, and iii) Increasing *Bosnia and Herzegovina's* participation in *Horizon Europe* by supporting academic staff. Available documentation shows it was generally efficient (and flexible) across several areas, including adequate choice of implementation modalities, resources, and management of delays.<sup>45</sup> Other interventions<sup>46</sup> were efficient in some aspects but failed on other fronts, resulting in their overall limited project efficacy. The review of Results Oriented Report (ROM) reports showed that the efficiency of several EU interventions was hindered for reasons mainly related to complex project set-ups, high numbers of stakeholders, ambitious responsibilities and insufficient capacities, capabilities or willingness of state actors to take over their designated project roles, lack of adequate resources, including a tight number of available working days, or low or too high spending.<sup>47</sup>

*Survey responses provide additional insights on the flexibility of EU interventions*

**Feedback from the EU survey provides useful feedback regarding programming and design/implementation of EU Youth support** (see Figure 8). The survey asked EU officials to assess the extent to which EU Youth interventions adequately considered eight elements during programming and design.

**Figure 8** *Extent to which EU Youth interventions adequately considered the following elements during programming and design?*



Source: EU e-survey Evaluation Team

<sup>44</sup> EU (2014-2021): Tunisia EUD Internal Reporting.

<sup>45</sup> EU (2022): ROM report – EU Support to Local Employment Partnerships – Phase II (LEP II), p.6; EU (2021): ROM report – Education for Employment, Bosnia and Herzegovina, p.5-7.


<sup>46</sup> Namely the Education for Employment, Bosnia and Herzegovina Project and Special Measures to Support the Response to the Refugee and Migrant Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>47</sup> EU (2019): ROM report – Special Measures to Support the Response to the Refugee and Migrant Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, p.13-16; EU (2021): ROM report – Education for Employment, Bosnia and Herzegovina, p.14-24. Special Measures to Support the Response to the Refugee and Migrant Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ROM Report 2019, p. 13-16; Education for Employment, Bosnia and Herzegovina, ROM Report 2021, p.14-24.

*The majority of EU respondents agreed that EU policies, priorities, and support aligned with youth needs at national and regional level*

**Almost all EU respondents agreed that EU policies and priorities, including EU strategies in the region were adequately considered in support operation** (38% answered to a great extent, while 47% to some extent, so 85%). Direct support to address youth's needs at national/regional level, and indirect support to address and mainstream Youth's needs at national/regional level were quite considered as well, according to a vast majority of respondents (76%). More than 60% of respondents assessed positively the EU consideration of inputs from consultation with youth representatives (i.e. civil society actors were sufficiently involved) (67%) and the use of political economy analyses (64%).<sup>48</sup> Another interesting feature is the attention paid by the EU to supporting core state agencies as duty bearers, a key factor for ensuring the sustainability of EU projects linked to the ownership issue. For 47% of the respondents, this issue has been adequately addressed, while 37% felt it had been considered too little or not at all, while 15% did not know.

### 4.3 Partnerships with other stakeholders and EU added value

	<p><i>A wide range of partnerships exist with EU Member States, primarily acting as implementing agencies. These partnerships vary in strategic focus, scope, depth, and duration. With the notable exception of Georgia, there is no evidence of joint analysis/programming, coordination (beyond the intervention level), effective division of labour between the EU and EU Member States, and sustained political dialogue on youth issues. While the EU has established partnership arrangements with other external actors, these are primarily focussed on project implementation rather than pursuing joint, integrated, cross-sectoral approaches. Strategic alliances with regional intergovernmental organisations have been developed with relevant regional bodies. European models are transferred in EU external action, with varying levels of success. A growing number of youth exchanges are organised at the intraregional level or with youth from the Union. These are generally considered to be highly relevant and beneficial. However, a certain “dialogue fatigue” exists among the youth involved due to the absence of concrete follow-up by governments or limited uptake by EU institutions. The effectiveness, impact, and sustainability of EU-supported dialogue processes also depend largely on the quality of the methodologies used to prepare and engage youth.</i></p>
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#### 4.3.1 Partnerships with EU Member States

*The EU partners with Member States, primarily as implementing agencies*

**There is ample evidence of the EU's partnerships with EU Member States in various youth-related areas, primarily education and employment<sup>49</sup> or in providing civil society support, including youth-targeted interventions.<sup>50</sup> Such partnerships were generally driven by the EU's need to identify suitable implementing agencies for its programmes or by the desire to join forces, scale up impact<sup>51</sup> or mobilise relevant sources of knowledge and expertise. **No evidence was found of strategic and comprehensive division of labour between the EU and EU Member States on youth issues** based on comparative advantages, with the exception of *Georgia* (see Box 8).**

<sup>48</sup> This statement from EU staff is not corroborated by wider evaluation findings. Though the EU increasingly invests in various forms of analyses related to youth, very few would qualify as genuine “political economy” studies, focusing on power, interests and incentives to change.

<sup>49</sup> Source: documentary analysis, case studies and interviews with EUD staff (particularly youth focal points).

<sup>50</sup> In Türkiye, the 2018 internal EU reporting noted that bimonthly meetings with Member States development counsellors were organised during 2018 regarding the Instrument for Pre-Accession/IPA 2018 National Programme, on the Annual, Multi-annual packages and the Civil Society Facility for the period 2018-2019. EU (2018): EU Internal reports.

<sup>51</sup> In the Western Balkans, supporting RYCO, the EU cooperated with the German International Development Agency/GIZ in 2020, launching a flagship project on *School Exchanges* in the region, foreseen to end in 2022. Source: RYCO (2021): The European Union and Germany Fund New Project to Connect Schools in the Western Balkans Six. In order to improve higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU and the Council of Europe joined forces for the Strategic Development of Higher Education and Qualification Standards Project in 2013-2015, which served as a base for further general and vocational education and training and Lifelong Learning.

## Box 8 Beneficial use of division of labour in Georgia

In *Georgia*, evidence of progressively increasing incidences of joint analysis, programming, and division of labour with EU Member States was found. Joint programming started a decade ago, focussing initially on traditional sectors and governance issues. Yet, the youth area gradually benefitted from applying these principles, leading to positive results. A case in point is the partnerships and division of labour underpinning the European School (covering *Georgia* and the region), which was created to provide concrete opportunities for young generations to find more and better employment and promote a better understanding of the EU. In rolling out this initiative, the complementarity with the activities of existing member states' schools in promoting EU goals and values was reinforced. More recently, a Team Europe approach was applied in programming the new *Employment and Vocational Education and Training programme/EVET* support. It is too early to assess the added value of joining forces in a Team Europe logic.

*Coordination with EU and Member States on youth takes place around specific programmes*

**At the level of specific project interventions, one can observe interesting practices of concertation, joint planning, and task division.<sup>52</sup> However, there are fewer examples of structured and formalised EU-led coordination with its Member States on youth matters**, though the topic is increasingly integrated into other coordination fora.<sup>53</sup> This is problematic in particular country contexts, considering the growing proliferation of interventions by Member States, non-EU actors and multilateral organisations, as well as the weaknesses often observed at government level to ensure coordination.<sup>54</sup> Despite potential opportunities and benefits, there is no concrete example of a Team Europe Initiative dedicated to youth. There are few examples of broader strategic partnerships between the EU and EU Member States aimed at joining forces and resources to exercise more **leverage** to push for structural reforms or organise a meaningful, iterative and result-oriented policy/political dialogue on youth issues in a given country context. Stakeholders interviewed attribute this largely to the lack of explicit and coherent youth strategies at the EUD level.

### 4.3.2 Partnerships with other external actors

*Growing number of partnerships with international agencies but focussed on implementation*

**Numerous EU-funded interventions have been implemented in partnership with international organisations (mostly UN agencies)** at local, country, and regional levels, focussing on a wide range of issues, including responses to COVID-19.<sup>55</sup> They are primarily geared at mobilising suitable implementation agencies for the EU-funded interventions (under delegation agreements). **This set-up generally allows the EU to tap relevant sources of expertise and cover a broader set of youth issues.**<sup>56</sup> A limited number of cases could be detected of broader, more strategic partnerships on youth, based on mutual interest, shared policy objectives, joint action, pooling of resources and, collaboration beyond the project level in a longer time perspective. Overall, it is difficult to assess how effective the various forms of partnerships were in terms of facilitating the adoption of more integrated, cross-sectoral approaches, mobilising additional funding, and enhancing leverage.

<sup>52</sup> In Tunisia a coordination framework between implementation agencies of *EU4Youth programme* has been set-up and meet twice a year, amongst others to jointly plan and promote synergies. Thus, the ROM report of the *EU4Youth-JEUN'ESS* intervention shows evidence of bilateral exchanges between *Programme d'appui à la jeunesse/JEUN'ESS* and other *EU4Youth* interventions which materialise in synergies. For example, a municipality was jointly by covered two different interventions of the *EU4Youth programme*, as a result of joint programming, in order to give the projects more impact and visibility at the level of a locality. Source: *Union Européenne (2019). Note de dossier. Préparation d'un cadre de concertation pour le programme EU4Youth.*

<sup>53</sup> Source: Interviews with EUDs.

<sup>54</sup> See Georgia case study report which refers to the recent Georgia Country Strategy Evaluation (2022) that pleaded for a much more pro-active coordination role of the EUD.

<sup>55</sup> See case study on Bosnia and Herzegovina

<sup>56</sup> In Türkiye, the EU cooperated with the German Development Bank on *Social and Economic Cohesion through Vocational Education – II Programme* and liaised with the World Bank, to improve the capacity of the competent Turkish institutions to address the challenges of the Syrian refugees to find legal economic opportunities (formal employment and self-employment) on the market. The review of available documentary evidence shows that the joint actions of EU and UN agencies, the German Development Bank and World Bank have been effective to extend the coverage of youth issues, and to adopt integrated approaches and mobilise expertise.

*Investing in alliances with regional actors*

The EU has invested in developing strategic alliances with major (intergovernmental) regional bodies such as the Union for the Mediterranean (*Neighbourhood South region*) and RYCO, as well as the Regional Cooperation Council/RCC (*Western Balkans*). This has strengthened the capacity of these regional structures to elaborate, with national governments, more ambitious youth strategies (considering the political economy realities of the region and member states) that provide relevant and more legitimate entry points for EU interventions.<sup>57</sup> This will remain a challenging exercise, particularly in the context of the *Neighbourhood South region*, characterised by shrinking space for civic action and a lack of ownership of regional youth agendas (as developed by the Union for the Mediterranean) by national governments.<sup>58</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Sharing relevant forms of European knowledge and expertise on youth

*The EU is interested in sharing knowledge on youth but faces important resource limitations*

**There is a growing interest within the EU (different DGs at HQ level) to share relevant European experiences**, reform approaches, innovative schemes (such as the Youth Guarantee), and good practices externally.<sup>59</sup> This is reflected in the interest/willingness to mobilise different European sources of expertise in various domains. Examples include the Executive Agency for education, audiovisual and culture/EACEA managing Erasmus+, Creative Europe and Horizon. On the Youth Guarantee, DG NEAR is working mainly with DG EMPL, the International Labour Organisation/ILO and the European Training Foundation. However, there are also **significant limitations to strengthening these internal-external linkages concerning youth empowerment**. These are related to human resources and time constraints of internal DGs, such as DG for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises/DG GROW or the DG for Education, Youth and Culture/EAC, which tend to have small international units. Similar human resource constraints exist at DG (e.g. to organise the numerous connections needed between internal units and external action services or to organise and or facilitate an effective transfer of relevant European knowledge and expertise on youth).<sup>60</sup>

*Evidence of effective sharing of knowledge as well as localisation challenges*

There is ample **evidence related to sharing knowledge on European policies, models, approaches, and good practices towards youth**. Particularly in the *Western Balkans* and the *Neighbourhood East region*, there is generally a genuine interest and demand among local stakeholders for such exchanges. The resulting sharing of experiences and expertise has generated **multiple uptakes** – in the form of policy recommendations to improve youth-related policies or legal frameworks.<sup>61</sup>

In several partner countries, the effective transfer has been limited, primarily due to limited levels of ownership and absorption capacity.<sup>62</sup> Other factors that may play a role include political resistance against youth approaches that seek to empower youth (e.g. *Jordan, Egypt, Libya*, and *Algeria*) and the impact of cultural norms (which make it difficult to address sexual reproductive and health rights (*Palestine, Azerbaijan*)). Several EUDs also warned explicitly against “exporting European models” without duly taking into account prevailing political economy conditions and youth realities (e.g. *Libya*). They rather plead for “localisation approaches”, which start from how young people think and act, seek to “go with the grain” and focus on what is feasible considering societal dynamics in the country.

<sup>57</sup> Source: Interviews with EU officials at HQ level and representatives of regional bodies.

<sup>58</sup> Source: Interview with Anna Lindh foundation.

<sup>59</sup> Source: Interviews with EU officials at HQ level.

<sup>60</sup> Source: Interviews with different EU stakeholders.

<sup>61</sup> Source: Interviews with EU officials as well as implementing agencies. Georgia is a case in point. According to the 2022 EU4Youth Achievement Report, 29 policy strategies or legislative recommendations to improve youth education, entrepreneurship and participation have been developed. It remains to be seen whether any of these recommendations will be considered and adopted by the Georgian authorities.

<sup>62</sup> Source: Interviews with EUD Youth focal points.

#### 4.3.4 Mutually beneficial exchanges between youth

*The EU supports an evolving set of dialogues with youth at an intraregional level, with the potential for yielding positive results*

**The EU has been supporting a wide and evolving set of dialogue processes with youth at the intraregional level and with EU youth actors and institutions.** These have served several purposes, such as connecting youth within a given region to promote reconciliation, *Youth Labs* to influence national/regional policy making, youth inputs into EU summits with regions, direct dialogues with high-level EU officials, attempts to replicate the experiences of the (internal) EU Youth Dialogue to the *Neighbourhood East region*, various youth ambassadors schemes or youth alumni networks, as well as recent attempts to involve youth actors in EU-related public diplomacy (such as the *EU Jeel Connectors* in the *Neighbourhood South region*). These intraregional and EU-focussed youth dialogues are fostered by the EU or implemented through various (informal) channels (e.g. structured dialogue opportunities between the EU and civil society) and partner agencies, using different methodologies to involve youth (with diverging levels of space for effective youth empowerment approaches). Access to these schemes varies from country to country, yet evidence suggests that the proactivity of participating countries can yield positive results.

*Five factors are critical for effective and result-oriented dialogues*

Based on a wide range of interviews and the case study reports, five main evaluative findings can be identified **related to the quality, relevance, impact, and sustainability of the various youth dialogues** (at both intraregional and EU level):

- **Ensuring dialogues have a concrete follow-up and yield tangible results.** Several specialised agencies interviewed stressed the growing “*dialogue fatigue*” among young people. This is visible in the *Neighbourhood South region*, leading to a reduced appetite for engaging in dialogues as these are seen as too formatted, too much of a talk shop and above all, generally lacking a solid follow-up phase geared at implementing effective changes. All too often, the focus of support is primarily on capacity development activities for youth organisations, much less on facilitating access to direct funding for these youth structures to develop their own agenda and implement their own projects (with intermediary implementing agencies stepping in and consuming most of the resources). In other contexts, young people are increasingly disillusioned and refuse to engage in society and political dialogue processes – though they may still be incentivised to engage at the local level on concrete problems (e.g. *Palestine, Algeria*).
- **Exploiting existing windows of opportunities for meaningful youth exchanges.** Both in *Bosnia and Herzegovina* and *Türkiye* it was observed that country-specific, intra-regional and cross-border interventions supported by the EU have included youth as beneficiaries, yet few of these targeted youth as key actors – despite the potential of the instruments used to address pressing youth challenges.
- **Adopting youth-centred approaches with a view to promote meaningful youth engagement over a longer period of time.**
- **Being realistic about inclusive approaches.** The EU has generally sought to apply this principle. However, several interlocutors warned that there are **limits to applying this principle**, particularly in youth dialogue processes with national, regional or EU policymakers. Experience has shown that such dialogues require the presence of young people who have acquired the necessary skills in terms of education and life experience (including in terms of language facilities), have been adequately prepared to engage in dialogue with policymakers (by external facilitators) and have specific knowledge of the themes discussed.
- **Relying on experienced process facilitators.** Evidence suggests some contracted facilitators lack the interest and skills to apply genuine youth-centred approaches. Others have gone through a learning curve and make efforts to systematically enhance the quality of their facilitation methodologies to foster as much as possible the empowerment of youth

in such dialogue processes (see Box 9) regarding the new approaches developed by the Anna Lindh Foundation/ALF).


**Box 9** *Lessons from the Anna Lindh foundation/ALF on youth empowerment and participation in dialogue processes*

As an intergovernmental institution, the Anna Lindh foundation/ALF has been involved since its creation in the facilitation of dialogue processes related to youth (e.g. the *Young Arab Voices* programme). Capitalising on these experiences, it recently reviewed its overall intervention logic and methodologies to engage with youth in such processes. Five key principles inform the new approach:

- **Move away from mere participation into action** to combat dialogue fatigue and focus on result-oriented processes.
- **Ensure that youth participating in policy processes have the right credentials** to avoid having the same youth actors systematically in gatherings (covering complex countries) and properly train/accompany (for one year) of potential future candidates.
- **Move from the regional to the national** as the latter holds more potential for transformative change.
- **Optimally use the potential of the platform of young actors** by having different components targeting young researchers, reserving funding for micro-projects at the community level, engaging in social media campaigns and putting in place a youth board to co-determine the management of the programme and the direction of the Anna Lindh foundation/ALF.
- **Focus on accountability** in terms of ensuring effective implementation and follow-up.

## 5 Effects of EU support in the sectors of focus – main findings

### 5.1 Results in the area of youth engagement

	<p><i>The EU has increasingly sought to understand the (often limited and evolving) space available for the democratic participation of young people and tailor its support accordingly. Interventions at both national and regional level have been managed, with varying levels of sophistication and success, to prepare youth for meaningful engagement and involve them as citizens and rights-holders in relevant policy processes. The degree of outreach and inclusion differs, reflecting context-specific (often restricted) country conditions, as well as diverging youth realities and attitudes towards participation. While the EU has invested in youth organisations, there is room for improvement in terms of adopting a more strategic, systematic, and sustained approach. Promising initiatives have recently been launched to connect youth to policymakers at various levels (local, national, and regional). However, ensuring truly youth-centred, inclusive, meaningful, and result-oriented processes with follow-up has proven to be a challenging task, as well as fostering whole-of-government approaches in a sustained way (including through capacity support to the duty bearers). Effective EU contributions have been noted in enhancing youth's information and knowledge about Europe, as well as promoting their participation in EU policy processes, although this participation often remains limited to highly educated individuals.</i></p>
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#### 5.1.1 Expanding political and institutional space

*The EU has sought to expand space for youth participation in policy processes*

**The EU has increasingly sought to assess the space available and windows of opportunities for meaningful youth participation – even in restrictive environments.** This was seldom done through political economy analysis but rather using other sources (internal knowledge, implementing agencies' international reports, youth surveys and barometers, events, social media campaigns, etc.). Using existing analyses generally helped the EUD to have a clear and realistic picture of what is feasible in a given context (also in terms of inclusion and diversity) and to adapt response strategies accordingly. An analysis of the opportunities available may lead EUDs to adopt a quite low profile and look for more indirect ways of empowering youth to participate in political and societal life, as exemplified in the case of *Georgia*.<sup>63</sup> Other examples of EUD response strategies are presented in Box 10.

<sup>63</sup> Youth civic engagement has long been politicised in Georgia, with ruling parties trying to use student unions set up in public universities and other youth networks supported through state budgets to gain political advantage before or during elections. Thus, it is not surprising that the appetite for autonomous youth activism is not high within the Georgian Government. The EU therefore decided not to focus its bilateral support in this area on youth political and civic empowerment and leave it to regional programmes (such as *EU4Youth*) to launch initiatives that seek to involve youth actors in policy processes (e.g. through youth engagement roadmaps).

## Box 10

*EUD approaches to youth empowerment in diverse settings*

- In *Egypt*, the EUD acknowledges that the prevailing political and bureaucratic “authorisation” culture requires close cooperation with government agencies (also for regional support programmes). This creates constraints, but the EUD successfully exploited existing windows of opportunity at the state level to support youth, e.g. on VET (with substantial co-funding from the government) that allowed indirectly to open-up space for youth participation or ensure a focus on rights issues (e.g. gender).
- The EUD covering *Syria* managed to successfully engage with young people in terms of fostering youth leadership, as well as policy dialogues (building on solid partnerships with civil society and the “appetite” of young Syrians to engage and think about the future of their country).
- In *Jordan*, the EUD has to navigate carefully, as despite pro-youth discourses, the government is nervous about empowering young people to act as autonomous actors. Some space remains for conducting projects on youth participation, yet the government strictly controls implementation, particularly in executing agencies (where the UN is preferred to local CSOs).
- In *Palestine*, the EU relied on the United Nations Population Fund/UNFPA to ensure that young people can get a space and a voice in various policy processes affecting them – in the context of the ongoing occupation and a very weak Palestinian Authority/PA with fragile governance and limited tradition to involve youth as actors and rights-holders. This approach is illustrated by the establishment of a truly inclusive “Youth Advisory Panel”, selected through national calls (2021) and geared to act as the youth interlocutor of the Palestinian Authority/PA.
- In *Israel* the EUD is not engaging in civic empowerment as it considers Israeli youth to be mature at this level (considering the specific conditions prevailing in the country, such as levels of youth engagement and the military service for men and women from 18 years onwards).
- In the *Western Balkans*, several EUDs rely on CSOs as drivers for pushing youth civic empowerment (e.g. *Serbia* and *Kosovo*), using different instruments (including the Civil Society Facility). Specific to this region is also the choice for the municipal level as the preferred level of intervention for youth empowerment (e.g. *North Macedonia*).
- In *Türkiye*, the EUD has long been timid in its support towards youth in the civic sphere (incorporating the issue in a fragmented set of civil society projects). A recent call under the Civil Society Facility included a substantial Youth Lot. Yet, evaluation findings suggest it did not trigger a more dynamic, coherent and effective set of initiatives. A positive example is the “Go for Youth Project” that enhanced youth networking and representation.
- For the EUD in *Moldova*, youth is considered a “non-essential” sector, which explains the rather limited portfolio on traditional youth issues (e.g. education and entrepreneurship). The issue of civic empowerment is left to regional programmes.

*EU interventions promote youth leadership though the quality of interventions varies*

**Most of the EU interventions reviewed have been context-sensitive. Several of them have managed to support youth in elaborating their own agendas, organising themselves and developing skills and competencies as youth leaders** for meaningful and influential engagement in policy-making at local<sup>64</sup> and national levels as well as in regional<sup>65</sup> or EU-related policy processes. However, various sources indicate that the quality of the youth empowerment methodologies varies, inter alia, depending on the implementing agencies involved and whether these have gone through a learning curve themselves.<sup>66</sup> There is limited evidence of structured engagement of young people in EU programming processes and monitoring of cooperation outcomes. Most often, their voice is included in consultations with civil society.

<sup>64</sup> Several interviewees have stressed the critical importance of supporting youth participation at local/municipal level – often considered to have more potential in terms of mobilising young people (around concrete issues) and having a meaningful and productive dialogue with authorities.

<sup>65</sup> An example of the latter is the *Eastern Partnership Civil Society Fellowship* programme, through which “EU supports young civil society leaders and activists” in the Neighbourhood East region. A review of the fellow profiles and projects on the Eastern Partnership civil society website shows which topics covered by the fellows were most salient at different periods. For example, with Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine, support for Ukrainian children and youth finding refuge in Georgia was one of the most pressing needs in 2022, while combatting Russian disinformation, increasing public awareness of visa liberalisation rules, and building capacity of regional CSOs on EU affairs was very much at the forefront of public debates during 2017 and 2018.

<sup>66</sup> This point was repeatedly made by specialised youth agencies, as they reflected on the skills needed to accompany young people in democratic participation and the importance of refining methodologies used. The Anna Lindt Foundation recently introduced quite fundamental changes in the way they support youth empowerment, based on lessons learnt on “what works and what did not work”.

*EU engages in dialogue with youth structures but with very limited direct financial support*

**The EU has engaged in dialogue and collaboration with youth groups/structures (e.g. Youth Councils)<sup>67</sup> and specialised CSOs – yet there is scant evidence of direct financial support** with an institutional development perspective in participating in policy processes. Most often, youth structures are seen as target group or beneficiaries,<sup>68</sup> while CSOs are contracted to provide services to youth in the framework of an EU programme executed by implementing agencies.<sup>69</sup> There is more support for youth-led organisations through the Erasmus+ programme and, more specifically, its EU4Youth capacity-building direction.<sup>70</sup>

*EU reaches out to different groups, but overall inclusion can be improved*

**There is evidence that the EU has reached out to and involved different categories of youth and related structures in dialogue processes,<sup>71</sup> but the inclusion of vulnerable and discriminated youth groups could further be improved.<sup>72</sup>** Evidence collected from various sources shows examples of sector-specific interventions seek to include various categories youth in policy processes and support targeted capacity development initiatives for that purpose.<sup>73</sup> There is less evidence of cross-sectoral dialogues and whole-of-government approaches<sup>74</sup> – reflecting the limited tradition of several partner governments to deal with youth issues holistically and integrated (a challenge also for the EU).<sup>75</sup> There are some examples of project-related EU support to the “duty bearers” (i.e. ministries and state agencies responsible for formulating comprehensive youth policies and delivering public goods and services to them). However, there is no systematic attention given to this aspect in EU youth response strategies. Several interlocutors at DG NEAR HQ level were concerned about this. In their view, direct support to youth needs to be accompanied by creating the political/institutional conditions for genuine public policies to emerge that integrate youth in key national strategies at socio-economic level. That includes paying structured attention to the duty bearers (e.g. public employment services).

**There are promising examples of effective forms of structured dialogue between state agencies and youth actors on various policy matters, leading to concrete and institutionalised results** such as the adoption of jointly developed youth policies at various levels, including guidelines with standards for youth engagement.<sup>76</sup> Youth Labs are another important approach to organising a meaningful dialogue between government and youth representatives. These are promoted in the *Western Balkans* (through the Regional Cooperation

<sup>67</sup> This is mainly done in countries with representative Youth Councils – less in authoritarian/restrictive environments.

<sup>68</sup> For example: the Youth Empowerment and Development Initiative in Bosnia and Herzegovina provided a series of trainings and helped organising policy development.

<sup>69</sup> This issue is linked to EQ 2 and the analysis therein on the place, weight and added value of intermediary bodies acting as implementing agencies.

<sup>70</sup> For the Eastern Partnership region, it involved projects that encouraged youth organisations to become more active in policy making and projects that promoted entrepreneurship education and social entrepreneurship.

<sup>71</sup> In Tunisia, the *EU4Youth* programme managed to reach out to marginalised groups, particularly rural young women.

<sup>72</sup> In Georgia, the EU funds 22 youth organisations in 2017-2019, yet there are underrepresented geographic zones and youth groups. The EU also supports *Young European Ambassadors*, which has ensured some level of diversity through improved rural representation, but involvement of ethnic minority youth is very low (only 6 ethnic minority youth). Source: EA profiles on EU (2023): EU Neighbourhood East – Young Ambassadors in Georgia. By contrast, several components of *EU4Youth* in the Eastern Partnership have effectively reached out to a diverse group of vulnerable young people.

<sup>73</sup> Source: case study Bosnia and Herzegovina.

<sup>74</sup> The Georgia case study reports that the *Employment and Vocational Education and Training programme/EVET* programme have contributed to the development of a holistic national vision of VET in a lifelong learning context, helped the government to focus on vulnerable youth and adults and to reorient education and training provision towards the needs of learners and employers, and thus contributed to an improved investment environment and economic growth. The *Employment and Vocational Education and Training programme/EVET* reforms also provide a good example of the use of whole of government approach to youth.

<sup>75</sup> When asked about points for improvement in relation to EU support for youth, several interviewees noted a tendency to deal with complex, multi-dimensional youth issues in a relative (sectoral) silo.

<sup>76</sup> Through the *Youth Community Centres/CeZaM* project, the EU contributed to the joint development and adoption of the Youth Policy in the Republic of Srpska and a Strategy for Youth for the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton 2022-2027.

Council/RCC) and in the *Neighbourhood East region* with varying levels of ambitions, depth, and success – depending on country conditions and levels of preparedness and commitment of the various parties involved. Experience suggests these processes take time before they create trust among participants, facilitate genuine interactions, and lead to tangible results. Backlashes can be expected as local realities change.<sup>77</sup> The outcomes of these *Youth Labs* are further assessed in the regional case study on the *Neighbourhood East region* flagship programme EU4Youth. In *Tunisia*, the “*Programme d’appui à la jeunesse*”, launched in 2018, formulates a specific result of the participation of youth in policy dialogue processes and the “co-production” of relevant policies. The outcomes so far are somewhat limited due to a combination of factors, including political instability, the prevailing administrative culture within central ministries, the return to authoritarian rule, and structural difficulties at the level of implementing agencies.

### 5.1.2 Policy, legislative, regulatory, and institutional frameworks

*In conducive contexts, the EU contributed to improving the quality of youth policies in partner countries*

**The EU has contributed to improving the quality of youth policies and engagement frameworks in partner countries** – particularly those with a conducive environment for reform. In other contexts, the EU had to accept that the conditions for fostering policy, legislative, and institutional reforms benefitting youth were simply not present (for the moment). In other places, the EU has been pushing despite a challenging political environment, and such efforts have proven to be a long uphill struggle. Typically, in these countries, there might be an openness to elaborate genuine youth policies and structurally engage in policy dialogues, yet this often does not go beyond the discourse level. Weak institutional capacities, limited funding, as well as constant changes in government structures, and rotation of personnel compound the problem.

*EU increasingly tries to inform youth of EU values and empower youth to influence its external action policies*

**There is evidence that EU efforts to better inform youth on what Europe stands for and empower young people to engage in EU external action and influence EU policies<sup>78</sup> are gaining momentum**, inter alia, due to the growing attention given to public diplomacy in the new Multi-annual Financial Framework and related financing instruments (see Box 11). Several regional interventions (e.g. the programme “EUROMED Jeunesse IV” in the *Neighbourhood South region*, the reconciliation-focussed RYCO process in the *Western Balkans* or the EU4Youth flagship programme) **have sizable regional exchange, dialogue, and cooperation components** that aim at fostering a sense of belonging to a shared community, which in turn should contribute to reducing tensions between neighbouring countries.

#### Box 11 Youth and EU public diplomacy in the Jeel programme

Building on the experience of the successful Young European Ambassadors scheme operated in the *Neighbourhood East region*, the *EU Jeel connectors* programme seeks to create similar dialogue processes with young people in the *Neighbourhood South region*.<sup>79</sup> As part of the expanding EU public diplomacy work, the idea is to build a network of youth actors who share EU values and are willing to act as multiplier voice in their country/region on what the EU is, what it stands for, what support it delivers and what values it seeks to promote. The youth actors are selected through a rigorous process that aims to go beyond “the usual suspects” (e.g. by attracting environmentalist activists, students, young mothers, etc.). Called *EU Goodwill Ambassadors* (now numbering 34 across the region, organised in “country chapters”), they are supposed to interact with young people from their own networks and local communities in their capacity of “influencers”. Another offspring of the process is the scheme of the *Jeel connectors* – youth actors familiar with EU programming<sup>80</sup> willing to link up with peers, amongst others to suggest projects the EU could fund at the micro-level. The EU claims the partnership is reciprocal and based on two-way communication – with youth being able to influence EU policies. Priority issues for the EU include explaining the contributions of the EU in a

<sup>77</sup> This can be linked to changes in government or even in persons in charge of key ministries related to youth (source: interviews with different actors).

<sup>78</sup> Amongst others through Erasmus+.

<sup>79</sup> There was a previous networking attempt in the region, called “*Young Mediterranean Voices*” yet this focused more on exchanges and policy dialogue between youth on both sides of the Mediterranean.

<sup>80</sup> It is envisaged that the *Jeel connectors* could be transformed over time in a youth soundboard for overall EU programming – following the example of the structure as recently installed by DG INTPA.

country and the fight against disinformation. Perceived benefits for young people include being able to express a voice, networking, exposure to EU policy processes and events, meeting peers from the region, international contacts, etc.). There are plans to apply the *EU Jeel* logic in the *Western Balkans*. While this type of initiative fits well with the goals of EU public diplomacy, it remains to be seen whether and how local influencers – who create content for EU visibility purposes – can be seen as representative for youth voices and interests in society. For example, four of the twelve *Jeel connectors* in the *Neighbourhood South region* have pulled out in response to the EU's position in the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

## 5.2 Results in the area of economic integration



*The economic integration of youth has been a priority area for the EU, as reflected in a wide range of interventions, often of growing scope and quality, although truly holistic approaches are generally still missing. There is solid evidence of relevant EU project contributions to addressing pressing youth issues such as employment, employability, entrepreneurship, digital skills, education linked to labour market needs, and youth mobility (in particular through programmes like Erasmus+), both at national and regional levels. This success is particularly notable when the EU: i) has made the strategic choice to consider youth economic integration as a cross-cutting policy concern, ii) can rely on responsive governments willing to address structural constraints, and iii) can mobilise sufficient funding and capacities. Overall, there has been a consistent effort to include vulnerable and marginalised groups in EU support to economic integration, including refugees. However, EU efforts have yielded mixed success due to deeply entrenched and intersecting obstacles to inclusion, as well as limitations in EU approaches and procedures. The track record is equally mixed regarding partner countries' ownership of economic integration efforts and the promotion of multi-actor dialogues aimed at policy development and reform.*

### 5.2.1 Relevant and well-suited approaches for implementation

*EU support to economic integration occupies a central position and improves over time*

**The EU has invested in youth economic integration and decent work across the board, and in several places (with a conducive environment), it is possible to detect more ambitious, multi-dimensional response strategies.** Employment and employability are consistently seen as the top priority for young people in the various regions. It ought, therefore, not surprising that this domain has been a **priority for EU support** during the evaluation period. Over time, it is possible to observe a growing sophistication of EU response strategies in many partner countries, extending to new areas such as green transition and digital transformation, and mobilising more funding – as illustrated in the four case studies and at the regional level (see Box 12 below). This holds particularly true in countries with relatively conducive political and institutional environments, where the EU increasingly considers **youth economic integration as a cross-cutting policy concern** that needs to be addressed in a comprehensive and integrated manner. In restrictive environments – where reluctant governments and public agencies operate in a rather old-fashioned way with weak overall governance (including corruption and nepotism) – structural reforms have substantially less chance of being promoted effectively and sustainably.

#### Box 12 Lessons from country case studies on youth economic integration

- In *Türkiye*, the EU has made significant strides in addressing youth employment and entrepreneurship challenges<sup>81</sup> with various national partners, development agencies, and banks. It also addressed the needs of the vast young and vulnerable refugee population in ways that fostered social cohesion, including support to female-led business models. Through this support, the EU could also contribute to developing a National Youth Employment Strategy and Action Plan and strengthen the capacities of state agencies in charge. However, the absence of an established system for aggregating data on specific interventions and monitoring effectiveness makes assessing the EU's overall contributions challenging.
- In *Georgia*, youth economic integration was not treated as a cross-cutting issue during the period 2014-2020, yet EU interventions made tangible efforts to mainstream youth considerations (including those in vulnerable situations) in economic development, labour market, and VET reform areas – impacting positively on young people's skills and employability (though less than initially projected). The 2021-2027 Association Agenda sets higher ambitions for youth economic integration and youth participation in reform processes.

<sup>81</sup> For instance through the “Employment, Education and Social Policies Sectoral Operational Programmes/EESP-SOP” 2014-2018 endowed with substantial funding.

- In *Tunisia*, youth economic integration has been a top priority in recent years, exemplified in the flagship programme *EU4Youth*. The programme reached out to various youth actors (in rural areas, the informal sector, or vulnerable positions). It focussed on concrete opportunities (such as those provided by existing value chains in different regions). EU support has been instrumental in fostering some labour market reforms (e.g. upgrading employment policies and modernising employment agencies) and education reforms (e.g. curriculum improvements) but has not contributed to fostering social dialogue on youth or improving analyses and data on youth challenges.
- In *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, the EU significantly invested in youth economic empowerment<sup>82</sup> (including vulnerable groups)<sup>83</sup> and dialogue among local stakeholders. It now provides new incentives for government action by introducing the Youth Guarantee scheme (also seen as a means to reduce outmigration) and by creating openings for youth supporting green and digital transitions. Yet the fragmented governance system, major institutional weaknesses, and the lack of a conducive environment for businesses constitute significant hurdles to realising this potential. The real EU contributions are difficult to assess without data and outcome analyses beyond projects.

### 5.2.2 Economic integration of vulnerable and marginalised youth

*EU has integrated inclusivity and diversity in its programmes despite challenges*

**Available evidence suggests quite a good track record of inclusivity and diversity in EU support programmes for youth economic integration.** The various case study notes give concrete examples of how the EU sought to reach out to young people in vulnerable positions – particularly youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, displaced youth and refugees,<sup>84</sup> ethnic minority women, or young people living in marginalised territories.<sup>85</sup> In specific settings, the EU has tried to engage with young people in the informal sector to explore ways and means to foster economic integration.<sup>86</sup> Experience from various EUDs suggests that the effective inclusion of vulnerable and discriminated young people can be quite an uphill struggle considering prevailing political economy conditions (e.g. attitudes towards ethnic minorities) and social-cultural norms (linked to patriarchal systems). The journey from inclusion to actually empowering vulnerable young people is long and often with uncertain outcomes and sustainable benefits for the young people involved.<sup>87</sup> This drive to ensure inclusive approaches can also be found in regional programmes targeting youth economic integration. Thus, in the *Neighbourhood East region*, the flagship programme *EU4Youth* has dedicated substantial resources to foster entrepreneurship, focussing on getting vulnerable and discriminated young people on board – with success.

### 5.2.3 Ownership of economic integration efforts through improved data and dialogue

*The EU seeks to strengthen the ownership of youth economic integration policies with mixed success rates*

**The EU has sought to promote dialogue processes with relevant domestic stakeholders** (e.g. state agencies and social partners) **on key reform issues related to youth economic integration in several partner countries.** Recently, the innovative approach of Youth Labs (in the *Western Balkans* and the *Neighbourhood East region*) holds the potential for a more fruitful and structured dialogue between state actors and youth representatives. The experiment is still in an early stage, and several implementation challenges need to be addressed to ensure effective follow-up, continued involvement of key policymakers, and translation of recommendations into new policies or relevant actions for young people.

In terms of results achieved, the emerging picture is inevitably mixed. External factors, such as the EU, can provide critical support for youth economic integration, yet effective and sustainable solutions depend on the ownership of the various

<sup>82</sup> Through programmes such as EU4 Employment and Education Action.

<sup>83</sup> The Instrument for Pre-Accession/IPA 2022 Action Document and the 2022 EU4 People Activity confirm this commitment, particularly towards rural women.

<sup>84</sup> The Türkiye draft case study note presents an exhaustive and quite impressive overview of what the EU has done for the economic integration of young Syrian refugees, using integrated approaches.

<sup>85</sup> There is less evidence of attempts to also include youth with disabilities as well as youth from sexual and religious minorities.

<sup>86</sup> In Tunisia, the *JEUN'ESS* programme sought to support youth working in the informal sector by creating more formal structures in the hope that this would lead to more formal jobs or income (including social protection). Most of the applicants in the related "Social Innovation Fund" were actively working in the informal sector (agriculture, services).

<sup>87</sup> Source: documentary analysis and interviews.

domestic actors (public and private), the ability to carry out (interconnected) structural reforms at different levels, and mobilise the necessary funding for addressing youth challenges. This reality is acknowledged by the EUDs from the regions – as reflected in a wide range of initiatives to develop such country ownership – both in conducive and restrictive environments (though logically with different levels of ambitions and time perspective). In more conducive environments, there is evidence of interesting initiatives to support local and regional employment analysis,<sup>88</sup> including data collection by government agencies,<sup>89</sup> and value chain analysis with relevant actors. Yet, there are also missed opportunities where investments in this type of data are not prioritised.<sup>90</sup>

#### 5.2.4 Sustainability of youth integration measures

*EU support is valuable for labour market and social sector policy reform yet results are unclear*

**When provided, EU support through various channels and modalities<sup>91</sup> for labour market and social sector policy reforms was globally effective** and has bolstered employment incentives on both the supply and demand side of the labour market. There is less evidence of how this worked out in the informal sector. There is equally a need to get more solid data on outcomes achieved and less successful initiatives.

*Youth skills and employability were enhanced but doubts remain about sustainability*

**Evidence suggests that various national and regional programmes have effectively provided support to empower young people to get better skills** (in the wider sense) and nurture their entrepreneurship. It is **not easy to find data that track to what extent this support was transformational and sustainable**. Available reports often provide interesting data on the number of people reached with the programmes (a good example is the regional *EU4Youth* programme through its yearly Achievement Reports) yet logically find it more challenging to collect insights on whether more significant changes were fostered, including in terms of access to better jobs and social protection.

*Positive effects on youth mobility yet there are important structural constraints*

Evidence at this level is quite substantial. It suggests a **high level of appreciation for the various youth mobility projects and flagship initiatives** (with Erasmus+ receiving positive feedback across the board for its relevance and impact on the lives of young people).<sup>92</sup> Concerns have been expressed that access to mobility schemes may become even more difficult for some young people (in authoritarian regimes) or further restricted due to growing EU migration concerns and visa restrictions.

<sup>88</sup> Evidence of such support is presented in the draft case study notes related to Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia. In the Eastern Partnership, the regional flagship programme *EU4Youth* invested in relevant research and studies such as the analytical “*Labour Market and National Skills Anticipation Reports*”.


<sup>89</sup> In Georgia, the EU has been supporting the National Statistics Office/GEOSTAT and the recently established Youth Agency.

<sup>90</sup> According to the desk review, the initial design of the *EU4Youth* programme included a component on regional employment analysis, but was removed to in order to direct more funds to youth.

<sup>91</sup> In Tunisia, the EU has supported labour market reforms through the multi-donor Trust Fund for the Tunisia Governance, Financial Sector and Local Governments, operated by the IBRD. Technical assistance is provided for the reforms of the employment policies and upgrading of the National Employment Agency and Self Employment/ANETI. The EU also used budget support through the *Programme d'appui à l'éducation, la mobilité, la recherche et l'innovation en Tunisie/EMORI* operation to successfully contribute to some reforms in the education sector relevant for youth (see draft case study note).

<sup>92</sup> EUDs operating in more restrictive environments have highlighted the crucial importance of people being able to move out of their own environment, meet young people from Europe and share experiences, discover how the EU tries to tackle youth issues and improve their own skills base through mobility and joint research schemes.

## 5.3 Results in the area of social cohesion and inclusion

	<p>The policy fields covered by actions in the social cohesion and inclusion sector have comparatively received less support from the EU. However, in some partner countries, the EU has strategically and substantially invested in access to (non-formal) education, including for vulnerable groups such as refugees, thereby exerting considerable influence. The EU has also supported interesting regional initiatives in the field of social inclusion and cohesion. These initiatives are often part of broader sector programmes aimed at youth economic transformation or consist of (valuable) standalone projects, such as those addressing youth and culture in the realm of mental health. Engaging on the increasingly polarised issue of sexual health and reproductive rights has proven challenging for the EU. There is limited evidence to suggest that the EU has contributed to expanding the space for inclusive dialogues on matters of discrimination, gender, social exclusion, and stereotypes – yet valuable regional initiatives have been noted.</p>
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### 5.3.1 School retention of youth and non-formal education

*Success stories co-exist with fragmented approaches*

EU support covers this policy domain comparatively less **than economic integration** (see specific finding 5.2). However, in some partner countries, EU support has been substantial, relevant, and impactful in fostering social cohesion. For example, in *Türkiye*, the EU's investments have proven effective in enhancing access to education and addressing the challenges faced by refugee children and youth, such as enrolment in the Turkish education system, retention and transition to employment. This was done, amongst others, through assistance frameworks such as the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye/FRIT, which included working with national institutions to introduce mechanisms and measures to engage with rights-holders across different levels of education.<sup>93</sup> Notable initiatives for young refugees include Turkish language training, need and merit-based scholarships, and measures to enhance employability post-graduation.

Additionally, the EU has played a crucial role in improving school infrastructure, particularly in disadvantaged territories, through projects like the *Education Infrastructure for Resilience Activities*. The EU contributions to non-formal education through Erasmus+ yielded significant results – though challenges remain regarding youth mobility and access.<sup>94</sup> The Jean Monnet scheme (providing grants to selected scholars to study EU-related issues as part of the integration process) is less well-known among stakeholders interviewed, partly because it mainly focusses on academia. Yet existing studies and reports suggest that the programme, despite difficulties linked to often tense political relations and perceptions of over-centralised management,<sup>95</sup> has produced an impact, particularly in terms of professional development, intercultural dialogue and contributions to the political, social, and economic development of *Türkiye* (see Box 13).<sup>96</sup>

In the Western Balkans, the multidimensional Erasmus+ has generated positive dynamics in academic and youth mobility, resulting in the establishment of 2,372 projects for bilateral partnerships involving 48,000 students, researchers, and academic staff in period 2015-2020. The EU contributed to the creation of the Western Balkan Alumni Association, a non-profit organisation with 700 members exchanging experiences, networking and helping to create new opportunities for youth empowerment. Erasmus+ furthermore seeks to strengthen higher education institutions through joint projects (e.g. aimed at innovations in curriculum) or structured projects (with the objective to work on education systems and processes). The latter has produced positive results in different countries of the region, yet this systemic institutional support also brings along important challenges, either linked to the higher institutions in partner countries (e.g. limited internationalisation, lack of innovation, low degree of ownership of the project), funding modalities (grants may

<sup>93</sup> For instance, a project such as the *Social and Economic Cohesion through Vocational Education-II* sought to install workshop equipment for at least 50 VET institutions in 15 provinces, foster awareness raising, increase enrolment and reduce drop-out rates of refugee children and disadvantaged adolescents.

<sup>94</sup> A huge obstacle is the complex bureaucratic procedure to obtain visas, hindering participation in mobility schemes. The evaluation team could also note concerns expressed by youth structures about the revocation of accreditation to Erasmus+ without justification as well as management problems, linked to a perceived favouritism towards politically affiliated organisations.

<sup>95</sup> Source: Particip (2023): Youth survey

<sup>96</sup> European Commission (2023): Jean Monnet Scholarship Programme. Online Survey Report Activity.

be too high to foster creative approaches), and political economy conditions (e.g. limited involvement national authorities).<sup>97</sup>

There are indications that the EU may not full tap the potential of this successful flagship programme as a tool for its wider external action objectives and public diplomacy priorities. Research indicates the level of embeddedness of ERASMUS+ in the framework of the overarching frameworks of the Neighbourhood and Enlargement processes is respectively low and moderate.<sup>98</sup>

### Box 13

#### *Some figures about the outreach of Erasmus+ in Türkiye*

Evidence clearly indicates that many young people have improved their skills through participation in Erasmus+, focussing on non-formal education. According to official data, Turkish projects in Erasmus+ received EUR 740 million from 2014-2020. Over 36,500 Turkish organisations participated in the programme, and 315,000 students, trainees, staff, and teachers had mobility experiences abroad. Additionally, under the European Solidarity Corps, the EU supported 350 volunteering and 150 solidarity projects between 2018 and 2020.

#### *Success stories co-exist but with fragmented approaches*

*Tunisia* is another positive example of comprehensive EU support that has contributed to **strengthening the education sector's institutional framework**. Progress reports available for the **budget support** under the *Programme d'appui à l'éducation, la mobilité, la recherche et l'innovation en Tunisie/EMORI* programme point to EU influence on key institutional reforms (e.g. development of a pre-school year, revision of primary and secondary school curricula, training of teachers and administrators, development of technical and vocational training), including school retention.<sup>99</sup> Through its social inclusion programme, the EU supported the retention of children in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the investment in ad-hoc sanitation systems in around 300 schools. Additionally, non-formal education frameworks, such as science and creativity workshops, have been developed to benefit secondary school students – several initiatives aimed at the development of institutional frameworks for non-formal education.<sup>100</sup> Access of *Tunisia* to the *Horizon programme* (European programme for research and innovation) allowed Tunisian universities to access grants and projects under the Horizon umbrella, which facilitated research funding and researchers' mobility, and fostered capacity development in research proposals.

In other partner countries, EU interventions are generally more limited in scope, project-related or a component element of wider sector programmes focussed on education-employment reform.<sup>101</sup> In *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, EU education support has focussed on VET and exchange programmes for students and academics. They experienced significant challenges in fully utilising the potential of Erasmus+ and other instruments (Civil Society Facility and EIDHR) for non-formal education. In *Georgia*, the central government does not see school retention as an issue, which explains why the EU did not invest in this domain. EU efforts concentrated on gender equality and empowerment efforts, implemented through UN agencies (e.g. the United Nations Population Fund/UNFPA), as well as local and international CSOs, to address the issue of access to education by women and girls among minority and

<sup>97</sup> European Union (2020) : Erasmus+ Capacity Development in Higher Education Action. Regional Report Western Balkans. Publication Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Bobotsi, C. (2021): European Union Education Diplomacy: Embeddedness of ERASMUS+ in Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policies. College of Europe. 03/2021.

<sup>99</sup> The EU has supported the retention of the most vulnerable girls and boys at school through the budget support intervention. The targeted reform focused on the development of the pre-primary school system (construction of 140 buildings for pre-school in 2020, development and validation of a pedagogical curriculum for pre-primary and 80% of school inspectors have been trained on the pre-school reform) and the governance of the sector (60 planning agents have been trained for the development of regional education plans). There is as well a target for the setting up of mechanisms of prevention for children in difficulty within schools (750 schools to set up this mechanism), but the report does not mention the results achieved on this indicator.

<sup>100</sup> A good example is the initiative *Science With And For Youth/ SWAFY*, part of the *EU4Youth* program, aiming at developing science and creativity workshops and competitions within Tunisian schools at the secondary level. This project is aimed at the most vulnerable governorates of the country.

<sup>101</sup> Though there is limited evidence of truly integrated EU support programmes which combine investments in education, social policies and employment as a necessary tryptic through coherent action-oriented projects and public policy development.

rural populations, where religious and cultural norms (including early marriage) often preclude young women from completing their secondary education. There is scarce documentation on the results achieved. Box 14 below amplifies the analysis by shedding light on experiences in non-case study countries.

**Box 14** *Some other EU experiences with investing in education and social cohesion*

- In *Jordan*, the EU experienced that it is easier to work on youth employment issues than in the education sector – where the influence of conservative forces is strong and preparedness to modernise systems is limited.
- In *Moldova*, the EU is not addressing youth as a “sector” but instead opts for relevant and feasible “entry points”, including VET (the formal side), leading to programme support to authorities (sectoral budget support is not an option in Moldova). A new EUR 10 million programme is now being prepared for the Ministry of Education and Sports to implement the National Strategy Education 2030 – in partnership with the World Bank (EUR 40 million in loans).
- In *Montenegro*, the EU has been supporting a sectoral programme focussing on three pillars: employment, social policy, and education (2015-2017). The latter was the smallest component, which reduced the scope for truly integrated approaches. It involved the participation of youth organisations in the design of the programme and focussed on students with special needs (e.g. Roma students). However, it was a complex process to manage, and successes were mainly achieved at the level of specific project activities, much less at the programme level.
- In the *Neighbourhood East region*, the *EU4Youth* has successfully focussed on non-formal and informal education issues, advocating for its added value, fostering dialogue, and creating space for innovative policy developments – particularly in recognising youth work and connecting with national qualification systems.

### 5.3.2 Youth to be an actor and producer of culture

*EU support to culture often targets youth yet seldom with a comprehensive and strategic youth-lens*

**Documentary analysis and field studies indicate that the EU sees culture as an important trigger for economic development and social cohesion in many partner countries.** In the case of *Tunisia*, the EU strategically sought to adopt a youth lens in its support of culture, i.e. to engage with young people as an actor and producers of culture. This helped empower youth through cultural activities like *Appui au renforcement du secteur culturel tunisien/TFANEN* and facilitated cultural collaborations, youth cultural projects, workshops, and cultural leadership development. Regional initiatives in the *Western Balkans* and the *Neighbourhood South region* supported cultural and creative industries, focussing on youth. Innovative and quite comprehensive approaches were used. Available information suggests alignment with the needs of youth as producers of culture, yet there is less analysis of the outcomes achieved.<sup>102</sup> The Erasmus+ special measure promoted intercultural dialogue and mobility for young people in the Mediterranean region. EU's support to culture contributed to economic integration, youth participation, and social cohesion by establishing funds, supporting cultural activities, and promoting the creation of youth-led CSOs.

In most other cases observed, the **EU did not adopt a full-fledged and strategic youth lens in its support of the cultural sector** (see Box 15 below). Numerous relevant actions that target young people have been funded, which may have empowered youth as actors and producers, contributing to social cohesion, and refugee integration. There is less evidence that these actions also empowered youth in terms of cross-cutting challenges, such as economic integration, participation in policy processes and peace and reconciliation. So far, there is no evidence of youth cultural activities focussed on intercultural dialogue.

**Box 15** *Limited youth lens in EU support to culture*

- In *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, EU support to youth and culture was minimal. The country only recently integrated into the Creative Europe 2021-2027 programme, so its benefits will only be made possible going forward.
- In *Georgia*, EU funded actions that helped to empower young people, but it is difficult to assess whether the EU support for cultural activities adopted a youth lens. The most recent Technical Cooperation Facility/TCF evaluation in *Georgia* found that the Creative Europe projects have contributed to social cohesion. However, it also noted that the programme attracted the best and most established Georgian

<sup>102</sup> This is the case for the regional project *Creect4MED* (2020-2024), see Regional case study.

institutions and CSOs, but has not been able to reach out to nascent and quickly growing (youth) organisations, which are often at the forefront of innovation.

- In *Türkiye*, the EU has only some fragmented interventions on youth and culture. An example is the *Dialogue for Change through Art and Culture project*, which includes small grants to youth organisations and individual artists seeking to mitigate polarisation and foster inclusivity among young people through cultural activities. While these grants are seen as positive, their limited scope and scale reduce chances for substantial influence.
- In the *Neighbourhood East region*, the programme *EU4Culture* sought to promote culture and creativity as an engine for economic growth/social development. The project, implemented by three cultural centres, faced major implementation challenges, including a lack of attention to gender issues, and the specific needs of youth.<sup>103</sup>

### 5.3.3 Youth mental health, sexual, reproductive rights, and services

*Limited structured EU involvement in these conditional factors for youth empowerment*

**Information on specific EU actions in these areas is generally scarce beyond projects dealing inter alia with support to youth and children who are victims of domestic and sexual violence** – a finding corroborated by the four country case studies (see Box 16).

Regarding sexual reproductive and health rights, several EUDs reported that it is increasingly difficult to engage on these issues in increasingly polarised and conservative settings (particularly in the *Neighbourhood South region*). This holds particularly true for action in favour of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Non-Binary, Intersex, and Queer (LGBTIQ). For instance, the Ministry of Education of the Palestinian Authority/PA removed the Comprehensive Sexual Education component from the curriculum in response to growing opposition – with conservative groups instrumentalising this agenda for political reasons. With EU support, the United Nations Population Fund/UNFPA invested a lot in building alternative narratives and challenging fake news on SRHR (promulgated in social media, often in the form of hate mail).

Regarding mental health, youth focal points reported that this was an increasingly important policy in many partner countries. One of the few EU-supported initiatives identified is the *Youth Lab on Mental Health* under a *Western Balkan Youth Lab* project – an issue young people could themselves select as one of the two priority themes. An interesting process of dialogue was followed, mobilising a regional pool of experts. The *Youth Lab* raised awareness on the issue (in a post COVID-19 context) and stressed the importance of prevention. It culminated in a final conference (June 2023) spelling out an agenda of action – which the *EU4Youth* programme will seek to push forward.

#### Box 16 Key findings from the case studies

- In *Tunisia*, EU support has enhanced the institutional framework for healthcare and social inclusion but lacks specific youth health outcomes. Initiatives like *Elargir la Couverture Sanitaire Universelle* indirectly benefit youth mental, sexual, and reproductive health by reducing access barriers and developing family medicine. Through projects like *Pour une réponse intégrée aux violences fondées sur le genre*, EU support addressed gender stereotypes and contributed to empowering youth to fight gender-based violence through educational and cultural activities.
- In *Türkiye*, the evaluation did not find evidence of structured investments in youth mental health or SRHR. This limitation is attributed to national institutions having the primary say in determining support priorities. The EU has prioritised gender and social inclusion, focussing on young women and vulnerable groups through grants through civil society. These projects sought to prevent discrimination and human rights violations against young people (women and LGBTIQ or on religious/faith grounds). Stakeholders acknowledge the positive impact of these actions, yet they emphasise the need for a more vocal EU stance and advocacy.
- In *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, minimal direct EU support was found for issues related to mental health (beyond a regional initiative) and SRHR.
- In *Georgia*, The Association Agenda lists strengthened access to SRHR and continued fight against harmful practices towards women (particularly in rural areas). This may have facilitated more pro-active, strategic, and impactful EUD investments on sensitive issues (e.g. right to health for LGBTIQ, access to SRHR, shelters for women victims of violence) through UN agencies and CSOs.

<sup>103</sup> Source: Regional case study

### 5.3.4 Inclusive dialogues on discrimination, gender, social exclusion and stereotype

*Limited structured EU involvement in these conditional factors for youth empowerment*

The EU has not sought to exploit its potential added value as playing a convenor/facilitation role of inclusive dialogues on these issues – beyond the projects it implements, which may seek to open up space and create opportunities to engage with different actors and structures. The Georgia case study mentions in this context the EU efforts to develop, adopt and implement the 2014-2020 National Human Rights Strategy, which has a dedicated section for ensuring the effective enjoyment of the right to health, especially by vulnerable groups. A good practice has been noted in the *Western Balkans* with a regional programme called the Western Balkans School Exchange Scheme (see Box 17).

#### Box 17 *Inclusive intra-regional dialogues among youth: The Western Balkans School Exchange Scheme*

Implemented by RYCO and the German International Development Agency/GIZ, the project opened a channel of cooperation with education ministries in the Western Balkan countries to ensure that the exchange was open to schools in remote areas and vulnerable groups and minorities.<sup>104</sup> The youth exchanges consistently focussed on ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups (accounting for ethnicity, religion, unprivileged education or economic background, and rural areas). In particular, during the first exchange, 55% of the students came from rural environments (village, small city/town), and two partnerships (four schools, 60 students) involved young people with mental disabilities and visual impairment.<sup>105</sup> While highly positive dynamics are generated by this type of project (particularly at the level of the participating young people), effective changes in perceptions, mindsets and attitudes at a larger scale will require time – particularly considering the region's highly volatile and polarised conditions.

## 5.4 Results in the area of peace and security



*Overall, there has been limited EU action towards youth in the field of peace and security, despite the existence of many challenges across regions in terms of peace-building, justice, and reconciliation, and countering violent extremism/radicalisation. Existing projects do not consistently and comprehensively adopt a youth lens to set priorities, design, and implement interventions. There is no evidence that the EU supports inclusive national dialogues between youth and governments on peace and security issues, although interesting initiatives occurred at the local level. In the Western Balkans, the EU has primarily promoted peace-building and reconciliation through a youth-centred approach, yielding relevant results. However, it is difficult to assess whether and to what extent the EU has indirectly contributed to peace and security by: i) systematically applying a human rights-based approach in (sectoral) support programmes towards youth, or ii) integrating a youth lens in its governance support programmes (including those focussed on the fight against corruption) to address the root causes of youth marginalisation and disengagement.*

### 5.4.1 Youth lens in formulating peace and security priorities and strategies

*Youth-lens are not consistently applied when formulating peace and security priorities*

**The scant attention given by the EU to peace and security issues was reflected in the four country case studies.** In *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, quite surprisingly, considering the context, no specific EU bilateral support programmes<sup>106</sup> focussing on peace and security were found. The EU has not consistently tackled these challenges, including youth empowerment as agents of change (beyond incidental engagement with young leaders through the political section, a regional initiative through RYCO and a few cross-border exchanges). In *Georgia*, the EU took concrete steps to understand youth realities in the context of conflict and create some space for youth to define EU priorities for peace and security. Regarding engagement across the conflict divide, the sensitivity of the issue of youth engagement (on both sides) and the difficult operational environment precluded the evaluation from accessing relevant information. While conflict analyses did not include a solid gender and youth perspective, many projects funded under the Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism/COBERM I and II involved youth and youth education (for example,

<sup>104</sup> GIZ and RYCO (2021-2022): Western Balkans School Exchange – Annual progress report.

<sup>105</sup> GIZ and RYCO (2022): Western Balkans School Exchange – Annual progress report.

<sup>106</sup> At regional level, RYCO took care of promoting peace and security – with a heavy focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina, considered as the “key country in the region in terms of reconciliation”. Source: interview with RYCO official.

on tolerance, cross-cultural communications, etc.) and, when possible, also people-to-people contacts. These interventions helped to strengthen civil society actors engaged in this domain, including women-led organisations.<sup>107</sup> Other interesting activities, positively assessed by stakeholders, emanate from regional or thematic programmes, including the *Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism/Hedayah STRIVE* global programme, as well as EU support to address root causes of radicalisation through working with youth, elders, teachers. In *Türkiye*, no evidence of specific EU-supported interventions focussing on peace and security or counter-terrorism through a youth-lens were found. The EU's efforts to empower youth as changemakers have been limited (short-term projects through the Civil Society Facility and EIDHR) and inconsistent. In *Tunisia*, issues of peace and security were incorporated (ad hoc) in existing platforms for youth inclusion in external policies or through informal events (e.g. "EU coffee talks"). EU interventions have supported countering violent extremism through social inclusion programmes, such as *Prévenir la radicalisation par l'insertion/Ebni*. **Other interesting cases** were detected through consultations with EUDs (see Box 18).

**Box 18** *EUD's challenging task of involving young people on peace and security matters*

- In *Syria*, the EUD (operating from Lebanon) has creatively linked up with youth and related CSOs, which has been helped by implementing agencies familiar with the challenging environment. The calls for proposals launched include peace and security issues – for which the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments/FPI is perceived to have the mandate.
- In *Libya*, the task is equally very challenging, considering the highly polarised context, the tribal governance system, the lack of reliable data, and the considerable risk for youth radicalisation.
- In *Kosovo*, the EUD expressed the view that it has no capacity to work on issues of peace and security, reconciliation, and inter-ethnic dialogue. The EU Special Representative (with a team of 60 people) has a mandate in this context but does not adopt a consistent youth focus in its work. In *Moldova*, the people-people approach aimed at confidence-building is privileged on both sides of the divide to implementing agencies attuned to local realities.
- In *Serbia*, the EU relies on the regional body RYCO to engage in sensitive questions about reconciliation and social cohesion. This impact is small, but it is the best that can be done according to the stakeholders interviewed.
- *Armenia* reflects a situation of very high political volatility, which makes it very difficult for the EUD to have a coherent strategy and plan. Peace is now the top priority of young people and for the EU.<sup>108</sup>

### 5.4.2 Youth as changemakers

*Limited evidence of structured approaches to empowering youth as changemakers*

**Except for Georgia (with positive examples of youth empowerment), the other three case studies report less focus on empowering youth as changemakers.** In the *Western Balkans*, the EU-supported intergovernmental mechanism RYCO successfully addressed reconciliation issues, using genuine youth-centred approaches. The six governments that created it provided a clear mandate to coordinate regional youth cooperation to foster reconciliation between the societies and promote a sense of belonging to Europe. The governing board is the highest authority and has a quite unique composition: six government representatives and six youth actors, with voting and decision-making done on an equal basis (if one youth representative brings out a negative vote, the proposal is rejected). Their approach is essentially based on mobility and exchanges, as exemplified in the apparently highly appreciated school exchanges. RYCO selects schools from smaller communities (rural areas), thus providing chances for young people to move and meet other youngsters. Also, several mayors joined, thus deepening the links. The underlying Theory of Change is that effective reconciliation should start at the individual level with the adoption of new perspectives of each person's values system. RYCO also engages with civil society to facilitate youth empowerment and plans in 2023 to launch a Regional Youth Cultural Fund. Interestingly, RYCO is keen to engage more on transitional justice as it realises that reconciliation ultimately requires progress on this front.

<sup>107</sup> Source: Country Strategy evaluation 2013 as well as reports related to the UNDP Dialogue Coordination Mechanism (see case study note).

<sup>108</sup> Source: Interview EUD, which took place before the new war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In the *Palestine*, the EU exploited several avenues for empowering youth as changemakers in a challenging context characterised by a decline in volunteering, as young people no longer trust political parties and other traditional channels of dialogue and engagement. For example, the EU shifted the focus away from people-to-people exchanges for peace and security issues (as this is no longer feasible) and instead focussed on service delivery (where realities and perspectives may still converge). Another avenue consisted of creating new spaces to support young Palestinians in formal agreements with the UN to represent their own voices abroad and with EU youth – using more positive narratives on what drives youth. The EU also enhance levels of youth engagement in selected municipalities – by helping to establish “*Youth local councils*”.

#### 5.4.3 Marginalisation, disengagement, and migratory drive of youth

*Lack of data to assess EU's impact on root causes youth marginalisation and exclusion*

Several EU programmes involving youth, particularly at the sectoral level, positively reduced marginalisation and disengagement from political/societal life. However, it is not possible to advance solid findings on whether the EU also contributed to addressing the underlying root causes. There is evidence on how youth-targeted (sectoral) EU programmes have generated *directly* positive dynamics and led to concrete gains for young people in terms of economic integration (see specific finding 5.2) and social inclusion (see specific finding 5.3). The same holds true for EU efforts geared at encouraging youth to stay engaged as citizens and be part of relevant policy processes (see specific finding 5.1).

However, the evaluation team is in no position to come up with clear findings as to whether the EU has also been able to *indirectly* impact on the root causes of youth marginalisation, disengagement, and migratory drive. In interviews, EU officials recognise the need to look at the root causes (beyond direct action in favour of youth), particularly in relation to the migratory drive. There is a consensus across regions that the deeper drivers of youth marginalisation, disengagement and emigration are generally linked to limited respect for *human dignity* (i.e. the slogan of the 2011 Arab Spring), non-inclusive governance systems across regions as well as a culture of corruption and nepotism reducing youth prospects to find a decent job while exacerbating already existing inequalities.

In the partner countries covered, the EU has engaged in improving (social and economic) human rights, governance, and, in some places, anti-corruption issues. The vast majority of respondents in the EU survey confirmed this, pointing out that EU support contributed to improvements in applying human rights-based approaches in EU (sectoral) support towards youth as well as to governance reforms and the Rule of Law. However, both at policy level and in operational terms, very limited connections exist between EU investments in the above areas, on the one hand, and addressing the root causes alienating youth and pushing them to migrate, on the other hand. The EU survey is quite sobering in this regard. Many respondents highlighted structural and geopolitical changes on the side of the beneficiary country limiting the EU support to youth. They stressed that migration and brain drain are primarily linked to the lack of peace and security and meaningful governance reforms, weak civil society in the country, and lack of national focus on youth issues in the context of multiple crises.

## 6 Overall assessment

*Timely upgrade of the status of youth in EU external action yet complex overall climate for effective*

During the period under review (2014-2021),<sup>109</sup> the policy domain of youth gained **prominence in EU external action**. Building on internal dynamics *within* the Union aimed at better engaging, empowering, and connecting young people, youth issues received from 2015 onwards higher levels of political commitment, visibility, programmatic support, and funding across the regions and partner countries covered in this evaluation. In DG NEAR and EUDs, there was a move away from ad hoc project approaches towards **more strategic forms of**

<sup>109</sup> Though the evaluation team also considered trends, policy developments and new approaches (e.g. the Team Europe initiatives) that emerged since 2021.

*delivery*

**engagement.** This was reflected in dedicated interventions directly targeting youth, mainstreaming efforts in sectors and themes, as well as EU initiatives to induce partner country governments to improve the policy, institutional, and regulatory frameworks towards youth. The Youth Action Plan in EU External Action (2022-2027) represents an important step forward as it holds the potential to transform the relationships with youth towards real participation as “actors” by its focus on three interconnected pillars of engaging, empowering and connecting youth. Several EUDs welcomed the upgraded status of youth as they were increasingly confronted with a wide range of pressing challenges affecting the local populations (often representing a considerable part of the population), as well as with the negative effects (e.g. brain drain, illegal emigration, radicalisation) stemming from ineffective governance systems, inequalities, and deficient youth policies. At the same time, the **overall climate** for “external” actors, such as the EU, to promote a strategic youth agenda has become **more complex**. In many partner countries, there is resistance from powerholders to unleash the potential of youth. Across regions, the EU has been facing rising authoritarian rule, growing polarisation, shrinking civic space, disinformation, and contestation of the European model of society. This complicates the lead role played by the EU in the promotion of democracy – whereby young people could be an ally as they often share the values agenda and/or want to be part of the European integration process. Conditions at the regional level have been equally difficult. This is driven by weak integration dynamics, repression, conflict in the *Neighbourhood South region*, an increasingly fractured *Neighbourhood East region* compounded by the war of aggression against Ukraine, and a volatile and fragile equilibrium in the *Western Balkans*. Within the EU, authoritarian rule and populism are also on the rise – which may have a negative impact on external action (e.g. in terms of credibly and effectively defending the rule of law and democracy). Considering this difficult environment in many places, the evaluation team consistently adopted a **political economy lens** (focussing on what is feasible in a given context). The team also recognised that structured EU engagement with youth in external action is a relatively recent phenomenon. In this regard, what is being evaluated here is a **“young” policy domain under construction**.<sup>110</sup>

*A policy domain under construction with positive developments*

Overall findings suggest that **the construction process of this “emerging” policy domain<sup>111</sup> has advanced well** during the period under review. This evolution is illustrated by the following elements:

- Emergence of new policy and strategic frameworks to engage with youth that are generic, not translated into clear operational mandates,<sup>112</sup> but still globally conducive for stronger EU engagement and responsive programming.
- Enhanced EU capacity to understand youth realities, needs and expectations – following investments in data collection, studies, surveys and various forms of context analysis informing programming.
- Utilisation of wider and more structured processes to consult diverse categories of young people – particularly on programming priorities.
- Positive examples on EU’s flexibility to adjust implementation approaches (beyond the COVID-19 response), particularly in difficult settings.
- Use of increasingly sophisticated delivery methods, instruments, and aid modalities (including budget support).

<sup>110</sup> As opposed to longstanding, more established policy areas (with tested policy frameworks and practices over time).

<sup>111</sup> “*Emerging*” in the sense of being a topic characterised by a growing political profile, greater visibility, more structured forms of engagement and funding, experimentation and learning-by-doing on the ground as well as gradual built up of knowledge and expertise.

<sup>112</sup> The first comprehensive political and operational roadmap on youth in external action came in 2021 with the Youth Action Plan – which many EU officials in the field still consider too generic and too much inspired by European experiences.

- Improved ability to exploit the EU's potential added value to share European models and practices and convene and engage youth in dialogue processes at different levels.
- Emergence of promising (though still to be consolidated) institutional adaptations to cope with the expanding youth agenda (e.g. youth focal points and dialogue platforms with young people in most EUDs).

*...in need of  
further  
development*

All this explains why **in some of the thematic areas** (in particular economic and social integration), **positive effects could be noted** regarding: i) evidence of direct support to an increasingly diverse group of young people (often with a genuine empowerment focus), ii) increased capacity and skills youth (including youth leadership and capacities to meaningfully participate in dialogues), iii) contributions to policy reforms (mainly national/sectoral youth strategies), and iv) emerging forms of state-youth dialogues (e.g. through Youth Labs).

The EU has been less successful in:

- Applying sufficiently differentiated and localised response strategies that reflect prevailing political economy conditions and socio-cultural norms, situations of fragility, youth expectations, and levels of disengagement.
- Defining and implementing coherent and integrated (holistic) approaches to promoting youth empowerment which recognise the required linkages between political, economic, and social inclusion of youth.
- Ensuring synergies on youth actions in the whole EU portfolio (bilateral, regional, thematic) and developing strategic partnerships (beyond implementation) with other DGs, EU Member States, and international donors.
- Reaching out in a systematic manner to vulnerable, discriminated, and marginalised groups – though valuable efforts were made and structural limitations exist (beyond the control of the EU) to advance in this area.
- Building genuine partnerships and alliances with youth organisations (formal and informal) which include structured support and direct funding for their own agendas and institutional development. There is scope for further improving the instruments to reach out to youth in bilateral, cross-country, regional and thematic programmes.
- Fostering genuine forms of ownership of youth agendas among central governments and state agencies/duty bearers, including the effective use of policy/political dialogue and the mobilisation of domestic resources to sustainably support youth.
- Ensuring the application of youth-centred approaches in interventions, implying co-design, co-decision and co-management, particularly those executed by implementing agencies (through delegated agreements of large civil society intermediaries). Too often EU support is focused on working *for* young people, not *with* and by *them*.
- Building synergies between youth support and EU actions on root causes of youth marginalisation, brain drain, emigration, and radicalisation (e.g. EU programmes on the rule of law, the fight against corruption, etc.).
- Putting in place effective M&E systems to assess (qualitative) achievements, learn and adapt policies and practices. This is admittedly a difficult task as conditions on the ground as well as youth dynamics constantly evolve, making it complicated to design meaningful benchmarks and targets. Furthermore, results of youth actions may take time to become tangible while achieving progress may require risk-taking as well as acceptance of failure.

*The expanding  
youth agenda  
triggered a  
political,  
institutional,*

This panoramic overview of core findings confirms that the youth agenda in EU external action is an emerging policy domain in which the EU embarked on a political, institutional, and instrumental **transition process** (from ad-hoc to strategic engagement) **that is still incomplete**. This, in turn, raises the question of what should come next in terms of EU support to youth in the coming years,

and  
instrumental  
transition  
process in EU  
external action  
that is still  
incomplete

and, in particular, what should be the place and weight given to this policy area in future EU external action. There is a lot to plead for further enhancing the profile and response capacity of the EU in this domain – not only from the perspective of cooperation with the countries and regions involved but also from the viewpoint of the EU’s own geopolitical, security, and migration interests. Yet the overall environment is not necessarily conducive for bold EU action in this field in the regions/countries covered by this evaluation. The EU has “*too many priorities and not enough funding*” while it is also most uncertain that more dedicated staff could be liberated to deliver a more ambitious youth agenda. In many ways, the EU youth agenda finds itself, therefore, at a **critical juncture in time**.

## 7 Conclusions

Table 3 Overview of the conclusions

Cluster	Conclusion related to...	Main linkages with finding section(s)
Policy and strategic level	C1: Evolution in EU engagement with youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsive programming (4.1)</li> <li>EU delivery methods (4.2)</li> </ul>
	C2: Shared vision, mandate, and response strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsive programming (4.1)</li> <li>EU delivery methods (4.2)</li> </ul>
Implementation	C3: Approaches, working methods, and modalities used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>EU delivery methods (4.2)</li> <li>Partnerships and added value (4.3)</li> </ul>
	C4: Youth-centred approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsive programming (4.1)</li> <li>EU delivery methods (4.2)</li> <li>Results youth participation (5.1)</li> <li>Results economic integration (5.2)</li> <li>Results social inclusion (5.3)</li> <li>Results peace and security (5.4)</li> </ul>
	C5: Alignment to internal EU policies and localisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsive programming (4.1)</li> <li>Partnerships and added value (4.3)</li> <li>Results youth participation (5.1)</li> <li>Results economic integration (5.2)</li> <li>Results social inclusion (5.3)</li> </ul>
	C6: Ambitions and institutional capacity to deliver, including adequate M&E systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsive programming (4.1)</li> <li>EU delivery methods (4.2)</li> <li>Partnerships and added value (4.3)</li> </ul>
Results	C7: Positive effects – Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results youth participation (5.1)</li> <li>Results economic integration (5.2)</li> <li>Results social inclusion (5.3)</li> <li>Results peace and security (5.4)</li> </ul>
	C8: Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsive programming (4.1)</li> <li>Results youth participation (5.1)</li> <li>Results economic integration (5.2)</li> <li>Results social inclusion (5.3)</li> <li>Results peace and security (5.4)</li> </ul>

### 7.1.1 Cluster 1: Policy and strategic level

#### 7.1.1.1 Conclusion 1: Evolution in EU engagement with youth

Across regions and partner countries, the EU has expanded its engagement with youth, supported by high-level political commitment, enhanced incentives, and increased alignment with EU internal policies. The EU has sought to deliver on this commitment – with different levels of consistency and operationalisation. In the process, it is confronted with recurrent challenges and structural limitations.

*This conclusion is based on the findings presented in sections 4.1 and 4.2 above.*

**Youth has gained prominence in EU external action since 2015.** This has been realised in many ways as a quantitative and qualitative leap forward in EU engagement strategies and interventions. The evolution was driven by various factors, including internal EU dynamics related to youth, changing

regional and national agendas, public diplomacy requirements, as well as a sense of urgency on the need to address youth challenges against a background of growing (illegal) emigration, brain drain and radicalisation. **These push factors generated a positive shift in the EU's approach in both conducive and restricted environments.** Notable improvements include: i) the move towards more context-sensitive, sophisticated and relevant interventions at both national and regional levels (though in varying consistency across regions), ii) enhanced mainstreaming of youth concerns across sectors and themes, iii) the search for more effective and result-oriented dialogue processes with youth, iv) new in institutional arrangements (e.g. youth focal points), and v) the growing involvement of political sections of the EUDs.

**While the EU has progressively focussed on youth issues, it has faced recurrent challenges and limitations in its efforts in the three regions covered.** These challenges include: i) the lack of commitment and responsiveness of beneficiary governments – often exacerbated by authoritarianism, weak governance, corruption, and nepotism, as well as shrinking space for civic or youth engagement, ii) the complexity of adopting truly inclusive processes and actions to engage youth; and iii) a shortage of funding to support comprehensive EU responses to the multifaceted challenges of youth – possibly reflecting that the political commitment at higher decision-making levels of DG NEAR is not necessarily strong (beyond a focus on visibility concerns and organising high-profile dialogue events).

### 7.1.1.2 Conclusion 2: Shared vision, mandate, and operational guidance

**The progress in the EU's engagement with youth action has not been underpinned by a shared, internalised set of policies providing a clear mandate and complementary operational guidance. As a result, there is confusion regarding the place and weight of the youth agenda and the most suitable response strategies.**

*This conclusion is based on the findings presented in sections 4.1 and 4.2 above.*

**The EU's choice to intervene more strategically and structurally on youth issues in its external action is recent.** Before 2015, the EU engaged on youth matters in an ad hoc, less visible manner.<sup>113</sup> However, the period following 2015 saw a heightened focus and reinforced political commitment, leading to the development of broad, overarching policies of a generic nature. This shift required EUDs to devise and implement relevant strategies to tackle youth challenges, albeit with limited guidance, which, inadvertently, initiated a bottom-up, experimental approach.

In this context, **valuable initiatives have been supported at national and regional levels, capacitating and empowering young people. However, there is substantial evidence that this bottom-up laboratory approach primarily driven by EUDs – without solid policy foundations or operational guidance underpinning it – acted as a double-edged sword.** On the one hand, it allowed for learning-by-doing and has led to a gradual refinement of EU response strategies. Improvements include enhanced analysis of youth needs and expectations, more sophisticated programming documents considering national and regional specificities, higher levels of inclusion of vulnerable youth, and more qualitative consultation and dialogue processes.

On the other hand, the bottom-up approach also faced several important limitations. It introduced widely diverging strategic responses by EUDs in terms of levels of ambition, scope, funding, and quality, which may reflect preferences by those in charge at a certain moment rather than objective needs and opportunities to engage with youth. The lack of a clear mandate and central steering has in cases favoured the adoption of ad-hoc, dispersed, time-bound project approaches targeting youth without addressing the wider policy and institutional challenges at country level. More fundamentally, it has created confusion among EU actors on whether youth is a sector, a target group to be supported with dedicated interventions, or an issue that needs to be mainstreamed in all public policies – alongside other categories of actors (e.g. vulnerable groups). The lack of operational guidance helps to explain why EUDs tend to struggle with mainstreaming youth, fostering integrated approaches, supporting youth in complex policy areas (such as peace and security), addressing the capacity development needs of duty bearers, applying genuine youth-centred approaches, or conducting policy/political dialogue on youth matters.

**The 2021 Youth Action Plan was the first all-encompassing policy framework in this domain for the EU's external action, which aligned closely with the EU's internal youth policies and practices.** Its strength lies in the potential for synergies between Europe's growing internal youth agendas and its external support mechanisms. Its weakness is the risk associated with the potential imposition of models that may not be aptly suited to different contexts. Furthermore, it does not respond to the many policy, institutional and operational issues confronting EUDs – including the challenge of customising and localising EU support in a strategic manner.

<sup>113</sup> Equated by several EU interlocutors as “ticking the box” approaches.

## 7.1.2 Cluster 2: Implementation

### 7.1.2.1 Conclusion 3: Approaches, working methods, and modalities used, including policy and political dialogue

EUDs have identified relevant entry points for youth support striving for alignment using a sound mix of instruments and modalities while displaying flexibility when needed. Other elements proved more challenging (with differences among regions) including political/policy dialogue, the choice of suitable implementing agencies, meaningful youth engagement in design and implementation, effective synergies and complementarities, partnerships, and overall cost-effectiveness.

*This conclusion is based on the findings presented in sections 4.2 and 4.3 above.*

#### **EU alignment with national strategies and priorities took place in conducive environments.**

Yet in most cases, the political economy conditions and varying levels of commitment/capacity in the three regions proved challenging and fluctuating. This obliged the EU to navigate and search for feasible entry points and implementation approaches. The resulting EU support scored generally well – with variations between regions and partner countries – on the following aspects:

- Investing in **data collection, analyses, and studies** regarding youth challenges in specific contexts.
- **Paying attention to national and regional specificities** – though there is scope to further differentiate response strategies to consider the huge heterogeneity of prevailing situations – in terms of political space available for meaningful youth involvement, socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, structuring, and capacities of youth organisations.
- **Consultations of youth** regarding programming priorities.
- Opting for increasingly **sophisticated delivery methods** and using, where feasible, budget support as aid modality with relative effectiveness (particularly when based on realistic performance criteria and indicators).
- Providing **flexibility during implementation** (e.g. in a context of COVID-19) and adapting to evolving situations (both new opportunities or major deteriorations).
- **Supporting central governments** in formulate public policies regarding youth and putting in place systems, processes, and budgets to implement them.<sup>114</sup>

The track record is more mixed – again with variations among regions and partner countries – regarding:

- **Ensuring national ownership of youth agendas** – particularly in countries that are highly polarised, ruled in an authoritarian way or managed in a top-down manner.
- **Selecting suitable implementing agencies** with the commitment/capacity to implement youth-centred approaches, engage in collaboration, and accept steering by the EU.
- **Facilitating direct access to EU funding for diverse youth organisations** in ways compatible with their needs and capacities.
- **Combating silo approaches by fostering synergies and complementarities** between various strands of the EU youth portfolio – particularly linkages between bilateral, regional, and thematic support.
- **Developing strategic partnerships with EU Member States** (e.g. in terms of joint analysis, programming, and division of labour) and other allies/international donors.
- **Ensuring cost-effectiveness** in terms of resources spent and actual results in youth empowerment.
- **Conducting regular and result-oriented policy/political dialogue.**

<sup>114</sup> This proved more challenging in the IPA region with limited effective actions.

### 7.1.2.2 Conclusion 4: Youth-centred approaches

There are promising experiences with genuine youth-centred approaches in EU supported interventions, but they are still rather limited in number and fragmented. The concept remains poorly internalised, while guidance and technical support are not readily available, and monitoring of progress achieved is weak, diminishing the collective learning potential.

*This conclusion is based on the all the findings presented above.*

The concept of “youth-centred approaches” – where young people are seen as actors and “rights-holders” rather than merely as targeted “beneficiaries” is quite embedded in EU initiatives towards Youth *within* Europe. Yet, the effective application of this approach is still in its infancy in the countries and regions covered by this evaluation. Many but not all EU initiatives, programmes, and projects *consult* young people on their needs, expectations, or programming priorities. Much **less progress** has been made in relation to other key dimensions of youth-centred approaches such as: i) adopting **bottom-up approaches** that leave space for young people to define and implement their *own* agenda, ii) **obtaining direct funding**, iii) **be part of a structured and iterative dialogue with the EU**, and iv) enabling youth to **co-create and co-manage public policies** with state actors. Recent initiatives supporting various forms of Youth Labs have tried to foster the co-creation of policies, yet these experiments are still young and in need of consolidation. The result is that most EU-supported interventions are designed for young people (as target group/beneficiary), much less *with* and *by* youth.

The limited progress is due to several **factors** including: i) poor knowledge about what constitutes a youth-centred approach and how it can be implemented, along with a lack of interest or prioritisation, ii) the reluctance or lack of interest of partner governments to foster youth empowerment, iii) the heavy reliance of the EU on implementing agencies, including larger CSOs, many of which may have limited interest and expertise to apply this approach, iv) complex EU procedures and conditions for accessing funds, not aligned to the needs and possibilities of (emerging and fragile) youth structures, v) in some cases challenges with central steering by EUDs, and vi) weak dissemination of good practices and collective learning.

### 7.1.2.3 Conclusion 5: Alignment to internal EU policies and localisation

The EU is still unable to find the right balance between taking inspiration from European policies, models and approaches in its external action and accepting that a high degree of “localisation” is needed to ensure relevance, effectiveness, and impact.

*This conclusion is based on the findings presented in sections 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 above.*

As mentioned above, **the expansion of the EU’s engagement strategies with youth in external actions has partly been driven by rapidly evolving dynamics within Europe**. A clear blurring of lines between EU internal and external action in this policy domain can be noted. The positive side is that this cross-fertilisation helped the EU external action cope with the new demands for knowledge and expertise arising from its stronger involvement in youth matters. A reservoir of policies, instruments, approaches, and models was available to guide external action, often accompanied by valued support from line DGs and dedicated staff at DG NEAR HQ. Furthermore, the mobilisation and sharing of European knowledge, experiences, and good practices, stemming from both the Union level and from Member States, can be seen as a potential added value of the EU as an external actor.

**However, the overall track record of aligning with internal EU policies and an effective transfer of European models and practices is mixed.** In conducive environments, characterised by central governments willing to make progress on the youth agenda and sufficient levels of youth capacities, there has been an effective, demand-driven uptake of European know-how and lessons learnt. This has been done by formulating coherent youth policies, capacitating state agencies, empowering young people, and testing innovative approaches. A good example of the latter is the successful application of the EU-inspired Youth Guarantee in some Western Balkan countries. In many other partner countries, major obstacles were encountered to the sharing and transferring of European models. These obstacles range from political and bureaucratic resistance to the development of comprehensive youth policies focussing on empowerment to sociocultural factors linked to the conservative nature of society (e.g. youth and sexual reproductive and health rights). More fundamentally, the conclusion can be drawn that the EU has not yet found the proper balance between relying on EU internal policies and practices, on the one hand, and effective *localisation* approaches to youth agendas, on the other hand. This holds true for direct support programmes towards youth (in terms of political participation, economic integration, social inclusion, peace, and security), the content and format of various forms of dialogue processes, and the export of good practices derived from European experiences. This lack of balance risks the ill-suited transfers of

knowledge with limited impact and sustainability, as well as a high degree of alienation from youth realities, needs, and expectations. To avoid this, it will be crucial to consistently involve young people in the design and implementation of interventions.

#### 7.1.2.4 Conclusion 6: Ambitions and institutional capacity to deliver

**There is a mismatch between expanding EU ambitions to engage with youth in the DG NEAR region and the overall institutional capacity to respond to increasingly heterogeneous situations, difficult political economy situations in partner countries, diverse youth expectations and impact and sustainability questions based on solid M&E systems.**

*This conclusion is based on the findings presented in sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 above.*

**In response to the higher political profile of the youth agenda, the EU (EU DG and HQ) explored ways and means to adapt their institutional set-up and capacities for effective delivery, but with mixed success.** One important change was the establishment of youth focal points, which are now active in the large majority of EUDs covered by this evaluation as well as in DG NEAR (i.e. in each regional unit and in the communication service). As is the case with other focal points (e.g. on gender or human rights), evidence gathered suggests that their effectiveness and impact depend on EUD-specific conditions such as: i) the political support provided by Heads of Delegation/HoD and Heads of Cooperation/HoC; ii) the overall collaborative culture in the EUD; and iii) the energy and skills of the focal point itself, including time available to perform this function. The fact that there are no targets for youth (as these exist for gender) may also hamper their effectiveness. Dedicated and competent staff at HQ levels provide valued services to EUDs. Yet DG NEAR lacks the time and resources to optimally play some critical steering and strategic roles regarding youth engagement strategies.

**Addressing youth challenges in a structured manner requires new capacities, knowledge, systems, and processes.** The EU has invested in such institutional adaptations to cope with an expanding youth agenda. DG NEAR and DG INTPA work quite closely on Youth, NEAR was involved in the preparation of the YAP and continues to be involved in the monitoring. DG NEAR and DG INTPA co-manage (and co-fund) the Knowledge Hub for expertise on Youth. Both DGs organised with support from the hub 3 trainings on setting up youth advisory structures in EUDs (which is a target for 2027 in the YAP). DG NEAR also sought to strengthen collaboration with other DGs (e.g. DG Education and Culture/EAC, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion/DG EMPL, DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs/DG GROW), as well resource centres (e.g. Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities/SALTO, European Training Foundation/ETF). They provide useful contributions, but tend to be restricted in terms of mandate, focus on their core business (which does not facilitate integrated and policy-oriented approaches), capacities, and funding. Existing constraints in knowledge and expertise could also be addressed by enhancing the exchanges of good practices and structured collaboration between different actors and institutions working on various (EU-funded) youth-related programmes

There are interesting examples of youth programmes developing M&E systems that adequately document achievements. However, most programmes reviewed have quite basic M&E systems, reporting mainly on activities and progress achieved on a number of indicators mainly focused on (quantitative) outputs, at best disaggregated (e.g. gender, age, social status). Therefore, the **EU struggles to show the effectiveness and impact of its intervention strategies in various policy domains** (youth political participation, economic integration, social inclusion and peace, and security) beyond quantitative data. The absence of solid M&E systems focussed on qualitative data collection also hampers the ability to learn and adapt intervention strategies.

#### 7.1.3 Cluster 3: Results and sustainability

##### 7.1.3.1 Conclusion 7: Positive effects – outcomes

**EU support towards youth generated positive dynamics and effects in all priority areas of intervention, though it was more concerned with economic integration and social inclusion. Progress was more limited on other key challenges due to adverse conditions in partner countries and/or EU strategic/operational choices. Missed opportunities to address pressing youth issues could also be noted, particularly on political participation, peace and security.**

*This conclusion is based on the findings presented in sections 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 above.*

**Overall, there were positive achievements in all four thematic areas of EU support towards youth** (i.e. political participation, economic integration, social inclusion, peace and security), **though**

**with important variations.** These were linked to the nature of the policy domain, the willingness of partner governments to invest in it, and the EU's own strategic choices and limitations (e.g. related to levels of EU power and influence to achieve change in a given context or internal constraints regarding human and financial constraints).

**The EUDs have faced considerable challenges in promoting youth participation, leadership, and skills development in policy processes.** Nonetheless, they **have managed to navigate these challenges by finding innovative, though varied, ways to engage with youth**, particularly locally on issues directly impacting them. In many countries, but not all, young people have become more actively involved in policy dialogues relevant to the EU, fostering a greater understanding of European values and aiding the public diplomacy efforts of the EUDs.

**A primary focus of the EU has been the economic integration of youth, as evidenced by various interventions with increasing scope and quality, bringing transformative results for youth across all regions.** The EU's contributions have been most effective in contexts where youth economic integration is strategically prioritised, governments are willing to tackle structural issues, and there is sufficient funding and capacity. However, truly holistic approaches are generally still missing.

There is solid evidence of relevant EU project contributions (at national and regional levels) to pressing youth issues such as employment, employability, entrepreneurship, digital skills, receiving an **education** linked to labour market needs or **youth mobility** (in particular Erasmus+). Strategic investments by the EU in vocational education and training, particularly for marginalised groups such as refugee youth, have had a notable impact. Initiatives in social inclusion and cohesion have been supported, including in areas such as **culture and mental health** – often as components of broader sectoral programmes or as stand-alone projects with significant value, integrating youth as one of many targeted vulnerable groups.

However, **the EU's efforts towards youth in peace-building, justice, reconciliation, and countering extremism have been less pronounced**, with a few promising localised initiatives, particularly in the Western Balkans. There is little evidence of EU support for inclusive national dialogues between youth and governments on peace and security, which represents a weakness from the perspective of growing needs.

**In relation to other key youth challenges, the EU has made, often in difficult environments, commendable efforts to empower young people or change government policies and practices directly.** Yet, in the process, it **often bumped into a wide range of constraints for effective action, either linked to prevailing political economy conditions at regional/national level** (largely beyond the control of the EU) or to internal constraints (related to the existence of vision, incentives, capacities, funding). Examples of **less successful areas in terms of outcomes** (despite dedicated efforts) include i) the degree of ownership of economic and social integration efforts by partner country governments, ii) the provision of relevant forms of support to duty bearers, iii) the connection between EU project support to youth and wider policy and institutional development work with central authorities, iv) the inclusion of vulnerable, discriminated or marginalised groups in targeted youth programmes and dialogue processes, v) the promotion of genuine youth-centred approaches in EU supported intervention, and vi) the provision of direct funding to youth structures to pursue their own agendas and develop their structures.

### 7.1.3.2 Conclusion 8: Sustainability

**The sustainability of the outcomes achieved is not ensured and depends on factors beyond and within the control of the EU.**

*This conclusion is based on the findings presented in sections 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 above.*

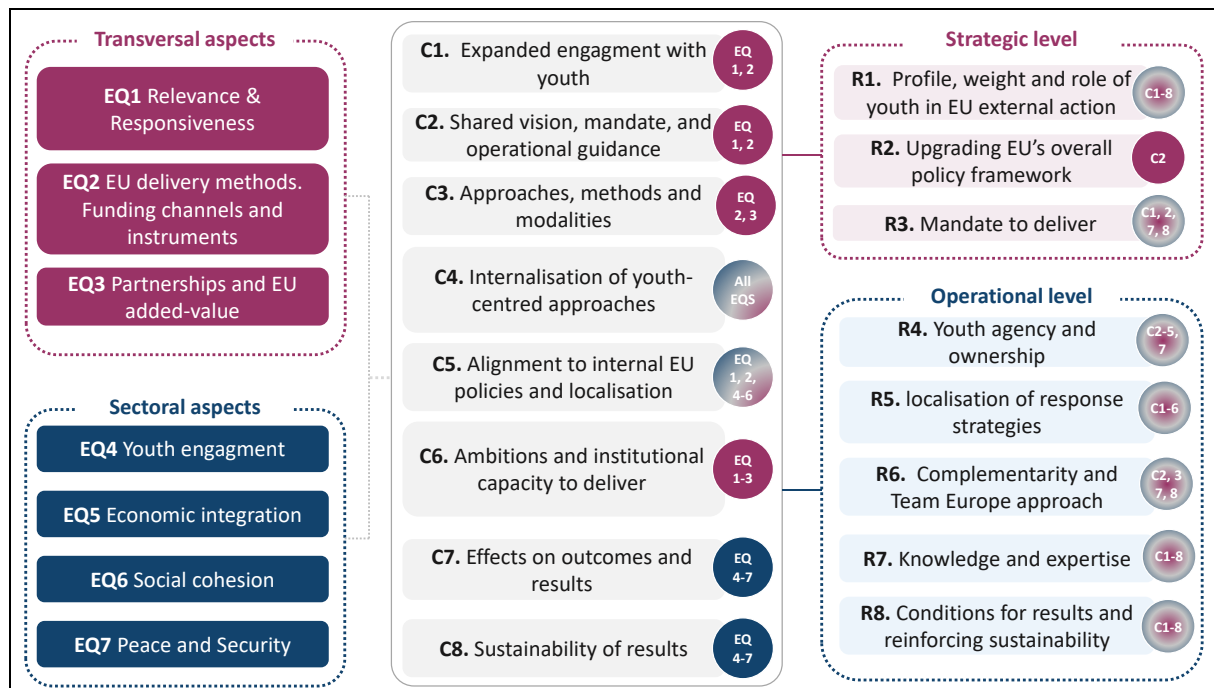
**Despite a wide range of positive dynamics and effects, the sustainability of outcomes achieved seems limited overall** – at least when judging from the available evidence base. Existing M&E systems generally well capture the (quantitative) outputs achieved in direct support but are not (yet) able to provide sufficiently reliable data on qualitative improvements, let alone on sustainability issues. Evidence collected indicates that major challenges exist in terms of ensuring four types of sustainability: i) *political* sustainability – embodied by growing government ownership of youth agendas and solid public policies, as well as advances in wider governance reforms and in the fight against inequalities (which form part of the root causes that cause youth brain, migration, and marginalisation), ii) *financial* sustainability – reflected in the existence of meaningful national/regional budgets for promoting youth over a longer period, iii) *institutional* sustainability – concretised by state agencies empowered to effectively implement (as duty bearers) public policies and deliver the goods and services to diverse categories of young people, and iv) *socio-cultural* sustainability, reflected in

the adequacy and degree of localisation of youth policies and approaches adopted considering prevailing political economy realities, societal norms, and youth expectations/capacities.

## 8 Recommendations

This section presents eight recommendations, which emerge from the conclusions presented in the previous section on the same key areas (i.e. strategy, implementation, results). Figure 9 shows the linkages between findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The evaluation team has sought to ensure that each recommendation is translated into operational suggestions. However, there are limits to this exercise, as evaluators by definition do not have a full picture of what changes are feasible internally in a particular institutional context (like the EC). Furthermore, in broad thematic evaluations covering several partner regions and countries, it is difficult to prioritise recommendations in a “one-size-fits-it all” format. A certain degree of differentiation will be needed to factor in often hugely diverse contextual realities.

Figure 9 Linkages between findings, conclusions and recommendations



Source: Particip GmbH.

### 8.1 Cluster 1: Policy and strategic level

#### 8.1.1 Recommendation 1: Ensure political leadership by rolling out a process to further enhance the profile, weight and role of youth in EU external action in the next years

*The EU should deepen its engagement with youth actors as strategic partners and allies in order to enhance the impact of its cooperation, foster its own geopolitical, security and migration interests, and build on the potential power of youth as crucial actors in countries at a tipping point between democratic societies and authoritarian rule societies.*

*This recommendation is linked to **all conclusions***

*Main implementation responsibility: DG NEAR leadership.*

*Main associated actors: HR/VP, relevant external Commissioners and their Cabinets, EU Delegations, the various units involved in DG NEAR, INTPA, other relevant DGs as well as the Member States and the European Parliament.*

What should be done?	How should this be done?
The overall environment is not conducive for “big bang” reforms regarding youth in EU external action. Still, to foster cooperation impact and foreign policy interests,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a more convincing narrative to upgrade the status of youth in EU external action by demonstrating that it would not only enhance the impact of EU cooperation efforts, but also help to foster the EU's own geopolitical, security and migration interests. The</li> </ul>

<p>the EU should seek to reinforce, in the next five years, the political foundations of its youth policy. (Priority: High)</p>	<p>latter dimension of EU's self-interest/possible foreign policy gains is critical to gradually expand the constituencies within Europe and Member States in favour of a more ambitious approach to engaging with youth. This could include a narrative on youth as defenders of the values agenda/democracy and actors that are keen to be part of the EU family in the future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revisit approaches used for political and policy dialogue – in close collaboration with EU Member States – to defend the youth agenda in partner countries.</li> <li>• Reinvigorate EU member states actions against shrinking space – also affecting youth engagement, perspectives on their future and the migration drive.</li> <li>• Make optimal use of the Team Europe spirit and the political leverage that can be obtained from “<i>whole of Europe approach</i>” – to better integrate and articulate youth concerns while fostering domestic ownership of structural reforms needed.</li> <li>• Deepen alliances with regional organisations to enhance outreach, legitimacy, and leverage of EU support.</li> </ul>
<p>The EU should develop structured and mutually beneficial strategic partnerships with youth as right-holders, allies and future policymakers. (Priority: High)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance the overall credibility of EU engagement strategies by ensuring youth ownership and agency, underpinned by enhanced dialogues and effective strategic partnerships. Current efforts to establish youth advisory structures at EUD level should be actively pursued.</li> <li>• Seek to achieve a balance between EU agendas and interests in partner countries (e.g. on security, migration, energy etc.) and the inclusion of youth in all relevant aspects of the partnership and cooperation.</li> <li>• Develop rapid response strategies demonstrating top political support for youth actors that make a clear choice for safeguarding democracy in countries tipping towards authoritarian rule and closed societies (e.g. current dynamics in Georgia).</li> <li>• Explore windows of opportunities to invest more in empowering youth to engage in political/societal life as well as in peace and security processes.</li> <li>• Invest in building strong and long-term alliances with institutions and actors at various levels pursuing progressive youth agendas.</li> </ul>

### 8.1.2 Recommendation 2: Upgrade, through a participatory process, the EU's overall policy framework

**The EU should invest in a broad multi-actor process to come up with a more elaborated, shared, and coherent policy framework regarding youth in external action which is based on clear political, strategic and operational choices.**

*This recommendation is primarily linked to: **Conclusion 2***

*Main implementation responsibility: DG NEAR leadership, management and relevant units of DG NEAR.*

*Main associated actors: EU Delegations, INTPA, other DGs, specialised agencies, EEAS, European Parliament, Member States, relevant civil society and youth organisations.*

What should be done?	How should this be done?
<p>(1) Building on the Youth Action Plan 2022-2027, the EU should elaborate a more solid and comprehensive EU vision and policy framework regarding the place, weight, and role of youth in EU external action.</p> <p>(Priority: Medium)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organise a broad inclusive and participatory process involving all relevant stakeholders (EU Delegations and HQ, other EU institutions, Member States, youth structures and actors, civil society actors, specialised agencies, etc.) to take stock of existing experiences, lessons learnt, and good practices of the past decade and serve as the basis for clarifying the EU vision and policy framework.</li> <li>Build on the refined EU “narrative” regarding youth (see recommendation 1) to put in place a more solid policy framework that: i) spells out clear EU ambitions, objectives and related theories of change, ii) reflects a common understanding (now missing) about how to approach youth (as a sector, a target group or as a cross-cutting issue), iii) fosters more integrated, holistic and adequately localised response strategies, iv) provides strategic and operational guidance on how to promote this agenda in cooperation and dialogue processes at various levels, v) clarifies the required EU coordination roles, partnerships, and strategic alliances for greater relevance and impact, vi) better embeds youth action in wider EU foreign policy, security and migration interests as well as in public diplomacy processes, vii) specifies what constitutes youth actions, including with a view to better map and account for financial flows supporting youth agenda.</li> <li>Recognise the need for differentiated approaches in terms of applying the new policy framework in hugely differentiated country and regional contexts.</li> <li>Identify strategies for the EU to exert effective <i>cooperation leverage</i> to push forward this agenda, including through Team Europe approaches.</li> </ul>
<p>(2) The EU should strive to produce a landmark Communication on youth in external action to further improve the Youth Action Plan while taking care of not producing a too prescriptive and rigid policy framework.</p> <p>(Priority: Medium)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure buy-in for a full-fledged EU Communication on future ambitions and approaches towards youth engagement in external action.</li> <li>Elaborate a widely owned Communication to guide future EU external action at DG NEAR/EU level.</li> </ul>

### 8.1.3 Recommendation 3: Provide a clear mandate to deliver on EU commitments

The EU should consider suitable mandatory instructions that may help to ensure an effective uptake and institutionalisation of its policies towards youth – underpinned by operational guidance and support.

*This recommendation is linked to: **Conclusions 1, 2, 7 and 8***

*Main implementation responsibility: Management and relevant units of DG NEAR*

*Main associated actors: EU Delegations, other DGs, EEAS*

What should be done?	How should this be done?
<p>(1) Taking inspiration from experiences gained in the fields of gender and civil society, the EU should adopt a mandatory approach regarding youth in external action -to ensure more coherent EU responses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider the adoption of a “<i>Youth Roadmap</i>” as a practical mandatory trigger to induce each EUD to define in a more coherent way suitable and feasible response strategies aligned to both prevailing</li> </ul>

<p>across the board and incentivise EUDs to respond better to pressing youth challenges in their respective settings. (Priority: Medium)</p>	<p>conditions in the country and to overall EU objectives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore the feasibility of introducing a “Youth Marker” in the next MFF to identify, quantify, and monitor support to youth more clearly.</li> <li>• Provide additional incentives nature to motivate EUDs to work in a more strategic and integrated way on youth issues.</li> <li>• Explore ways and means to make better use of youth focal points (where they exist) as well as to promote the adoption of a “<i>whole of Delegation</i>” approach (steered by EUD senior management) to foster the integration of youth concerns across various policy domains and instruments.</li> </ul>
<p>(2) The EU should invest in providing operational guidance, relevant trainings and smart technical assistance facilities to effective implementation of the mandate. (Priority: High)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in relevant, cost-effective and users-friendly operational guidance on core “<i>how-to-do</i>” questions to which EU policymakers and practitioners are now confronted e.g. on how to i) apply youth-centred approaches in dialogue and cooperation processes, ii) adopt integrated approaches combining direct support and policy reform, iii) improve the use of budget support, or iv) reinvigorate policy/political dialogue on youth issues, and v) ensure more result-oriented dialogues with youth, etc. Innovative ways should be tested out to reduce the cost of producing such guidance (e.g. by capitalizing on existing material and the knowledge/ expertise of EU actors involved).</li> <li>• Ensure that well-endowed and flexible technical assistance facilities to respond to demands of EU Delegations, primarily for short-term and action-oriented support (e.g. in terms of localising youth support, moving towards more integrated approaches, or enhancing the quality of the dialogue with youth).</li> </ul>

## 8.2 Cluster 2: Implementation and sustainability of results

### 8.2.1 Recommendation 4: Enhance youth agency and ownership

**The EU should increase the space available for youth actors in agenda setting, design, and implementation of support programmes, as well as the various dialogue processes at different levels.**

*This recommendation is linked to: **Conclusions 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7.***

*Main implementation responsibility: DG NEAR, relevant units, and EUDs.*

*Main associated actors: EEAS, other DGs.*

What should be done?	How should this be done?
<p>(1) To ensure greater relevance, effectiveness and sustainable impact, the EU should systematically apply youth-centred approaches in all aspects of its engagement strategies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen the EU's capacity to understand evolving youth needs and priorities – by enhancing the quality and depth of political economy, stakeholder, and conflict analyses.<sup>115</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>115</sup> This can in particular be improved regarding: i) the arena of youth actors at various levels including prevailing power relations and politics; ii) the key values and norms driving youth behaviour and engagement; iii) the identification of genuine youth changemakers; iii) realistic avenues to enhance the EU's reach out to vulnerable and marginalised young people; iv) the preferred avenues for youth civic engagement in different contexts and moments; v) possible entry points for a fruitful and productive dialogue with state authorities on necessary youth reforms

<p>(Priority: High)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-up and institutionalise structured and iterative dialogue spaces with young people at local, national, regional, and global levels – particularly by generalising the ongoing process of establishing Youth Advisory structures or platforms at EUD level).</li> <li>• Refine instruments and methodologies related to youth participation in policy processes by addressing challenges related to the conditions that entitle young people to engage and the impact of youth participation.</li> <li>• Particularly in terms of fostering youth participation in policy processes, make a better use of windows of opportunities to engage youth at local/municipal level around concrete challenges they face.</li> <li>• Upgrade the overall conditions for a meaningful youth participation in core EU cooperation and dialogue processes (in terms of information, capacity support, youth leadership, networking, and advocacy skills).</li> <li>• Explore ways and means to put in place more suitable systems and procedures to facilitate direct EU funding to legitimate youth structures and initiatives at different levels.</li> <li>• Further provide flexibility to EUDs – despite often restrictive programming choices, to respond to local dynamics and evolving demands.</li> </ul>
<p>(2) The EU should ensure that youth-centred approaches are genuinely applied by all intermediary structures involved in implementation. (Priority: High)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply stricter quality criteria in selecting suitable implementing agencies requiring proven knowledge, expertise, and experience to use youth-centred approaches.</li> <li>• Monitor civil society organisations receiving grants to work with youth on their performance in applying youth-centred approaches.</li> </ul>

### 8.2.2 Recommendation 5: Promote a higher degree of localisation of response strategies

The EU should find a better balance between using internal models and good practices in working with youth (in a logic of alignment) and the need for localisation (as a condition for relevant, realistic and feasible implementation and in order to reinforce ownership by both youth actors and governments).

*This recommendation is linked to: Conclusions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.*

*Main implementation responsibility: EU Delegations, DG NEAR, thematic units.*

*Main associated actors: other DGs involved, EEAS.*

What should be done?	How should this be done?
<p>Ensure bottom-up approaches when applying European policy frameworks and provide guidance on how to engage with youth – starting from local realities and considering youth values, priorities, and dynamics. (Priority: Medium)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen partnerships with youth structures, civil society organisation and other relevant actors to stimulate the emergence and formulation of genuine local agendas.</li> <li>• Facilitate, where possible, dialogue with government and youth on how to foster localised approaches. Use political economy analyses to identify possible entry points for such an approach in restrictive/closed environments.</li> <li>• Create space in the programming process to accommodate demand-driven dynamics.</li> <li>• Ensure a connection between localised agendas thus produced and relevant European experiences and models by customising the external inputs to facilitate “best fits”.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor with youth the quality of the localisation processes.</li> <li>• Ensure that the actions of other DGs involved in youth support are integrated and coherent with this search for a better balance between alignment and localisation.</li> </ul>
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### 8.2.3 Recommendation 6: Strengthen the complementary and coherent use of bilateral, regional, thematic, and global instruments – using a Team Europe approach.

**The EU should better link its efforts at bilateral, regional, and global levels in promoting youth engagement and apply, where possible, a Team Europe approach.**

*This recommendation is linked to: **Conclusion 2, 3, 7 and 8.***

*Main implementation responsibility: Management of DG NEAR.*

*Main associated actors: Relevant units, EU Delegations, other DGs, EEAS.*

What should be done?	How should this be done?
<p>Foster a “whole of Delegation” approach in the youth domain with a view to reduce silos and reinforce the synergies between different interventions in the EUD portfolio.</p> <p><i>(Priority: Medium)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rethink the way in which regional programmes can add value and relate to bilateral programmes while respecting the need for localisation of youth agendas (see above recommendation 5).</li> <li>• Provide clear instructions and incentives to systematically explore the opportunities for Team Europe approaches in respective/policy dialogue, programming, and implementation youth support.</li> <li>• Ensure better linkages and cross-fertilisation between cooperation processes and the political EU agenda regarding youth, particularly in the various dialogues at different levels and the EU’s public diplomacy.</li> </ul>

### 8.2.4 Recommendation 7: Find creative ways to enhance levels of knowledge and expertise

**The EU should ensure a better match between an expanding youth agenda and its institutional capacity to deliver, including monitoring progress.**

*This recommendation is linked to: **all conclusions***

*Main implementation responsibility: Political leadership DG NEAR, Head of Delegation, DG INTPA*

*Main associated actors: Relevant support units at DG NEAR, EUDs, other DGs.*

What should be done?	How should this be done?
<p>In the light of the structural constraints in terms of human resources and funding, it is not realistic to ask for “more staff”. Still, the EU should find alternative ways to reduce the mismatch between EU ambitions and response capacities.</p> <p><i>(Priority: High)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generalise the use of youth focal points in EUDs and improve their functioning by ensuring stronger political support by HoD/HoC, a feasible portfolio, and sufficient resources to facilitate the internalisation of the youth agenda across the Delegation.</li> <li>• Further strengthen the collaboration with DG INTPA through the existing Knowledge Hub for Expertise on Youth (whose remit and resource base could be further expanded).</li> <li>• Expand the number of trainings provided to EUDs on shared “how-to-questions”.</li> <li>• Explore ways to enhance the collaboration with other DGs in external action.</li> <li>• Further deepen the partnerships with specialised agencies working on youth (e.g. European Training Foundation).</li> <li>• Provide incentives for EUDs to further develop partnerships and alliances with relevant knowledge institutions at different levels (particularly local).</li> <li>• Mobilise relevant expertise to help EUDs in terms of enhancing their overall response strategies and HQ/EUDs to refine M&amp;E</li> </ul>

	approaches, accountability and learning with a view to better track outcomes and deeper changes.
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### 8.2.5 Recommendation 8: Improve the overall conditions to achieve results and reinforce sustainability

**The EU should refine and consolidate its sustainability strategies and approaches, building on positive achievements in the past years and taking into account the complex (deteriorating) environment in many partner countries.**

*This recommendation is linked to: **all conclusions***

*Main implementation responsibility: Leadership DG NEAR, relevant units.*

*Main associated actors: EU Delegations, other DGs, EEAS.*

What should be done?	How should this be done?
<p>The EU should enhance its overall capacity to work in a result-oriented manner in cooperation and dialogue processes with youth and reflect in a deeper way on how to achieve sustainability in different contexts.</p> <p><i>(Priority: Medium)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assume political leadership in strengthening the overall policy/strategic frameworks (see recommendations 1, 2 and 3 above).</li> <li>• Make an effective use of the mandatory Risk Management Frameworks, particularly in authoritarian, fragile, and conflict settings.</li> <li>• Use the Theories of Change to identify pathways to ensure ownership by youth actors and governments, particularly when the space and scope for action is limited due to an uncondusive political climate.</li> <li>• Invest in localising youth agendas and processes – underpinned by solid contextual and political economy analyses.</li> <li>• Develop strategic partnerships with legitimate and relevant youth structures.</li> <li>• Improve the quality and result-oriented focus on dialogue processes with youth at various levels.</li> <li>• Combine targeted support with enabling governments to formulate and implement coherent policies, underpinned by sustainable budgets based on domestic resources.</li> <li>• Ensure flexibility to adapt overall response strategies to changing conditions or new opportunities.</li> <li>• Make optimal use of opportunities created by the Team Europe approach.</li> <li>• Invest in much more solid M&amp;E and learning systems to facilitate the adaptive management of support provided.</li> </ul>

## Annex: List of documents consulted

### Global EU regulatory, policy and youth documents

#### Overarching policy and regulatory documents

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- CoE (2013): The Overarching Post 2015 Agenda, 25 June 2013.
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