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# **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

On the Social Inclusion of Young People with Fewer Opportunities Through Non-Formal Education and Volunteering Activities

NOVEMBER 2024

## **S.Y.S.P.U.C.**

Strengthening Youth Spaces and Participation  
for Underrepresented Communities

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# Executive Summary

This document sets out to advocate for the benefits that non-formal education and volunteering opportunities bring to the social inclusion of young people, the level of civic participation, and the overall impact of youth development, especially when we look at youth with fewer opportunities from under-represented communities. For the purpose of this document, we define under-represented groups as *'communities or individuals who have limited representation and voice in society, including in education, politics, and other decision-making bodies'*. This often means low participation in the decision-making process at government levels and less access to job opportunities<sup>1</sup>. In such groups, youth unemployment is high, and youth participation in decision-making processes is lacking.

A study commissioned by the European Youth Forum on the impact of non-formal education<sup>2</sup> found that involvement of young people in youth organizations not only enhances employability skills, but also strengthens young people's capacity to connect to others, exchange information and build networks. Furthermore, according to research conducted on Inclusion by the Pool of European Youth Researchers<sup>3</sup>, volunteering was voted as a key factor in combating discrimination by more than 70% of the participants. This is especially important when we look at communities where youth are limited in their ability to access non-formal education opportunities, as a first key step, thus hindering their further ability to benefit from the long-term positive impact of non-formal education on social and character development, shown through multiple studies, among which a recent research measuring the impact of youth organizations, M.I.Y.O<sup>4</sup>, led by the European Region of the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM), Maynooth University and YMCA Netherlands.

Youth can become active citizens by participating in quality non-formal education activities and volunteering, through membership-based organizations, with long-term development objectives. This policy recommendations document gives the following recommendations to governments and institutions in the European Union and the Western Balkans:

## Funding and support

- Establish stable funding mechanisms for non-formal education and volunteering initiatives to ensure their sustainability.
- Increase funding for youth inclusion programs under EU Erasmus+ and other relevant instruments, to support marginalized youth in the Western Balkans.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.scout.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/d2.2\\_local\\_youth\\_work\\_matters.pdf](https://www.scout.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/d2.2_local_youth_work_matters.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Study on the impact of Non-Formal Education in youth organizations on young people's employability - <https://www.youthforum.org/files/Study2C20No-Formal20Education.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://zenodo.org/records/3716226>

<sup>4</sup> <https://impactofyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/D3.2-Phase-2-Summary-Report-and-Recommendations.pdf>

- Design support instruments that support genuine youth movements, working at the grassroots level with young people from under-represented communities.
- Design mechanisms and projects that empower young people to develop youth-led initiatives in their communities.
- Establish Youth Centers where youth organizations can access office facilities, communication tools, and other logistical support at little or no cost. These physical spaces, paired with a skills pool, can create a concentrated network of resources to support youth-led initiatives.

### **Program development and access**

- Integrate volunteering as a key component of national youth strategies to promote civic engagement among youth.
- Build effective mechanisms to support and recognize the competencies built through volunteering.
- Give support to youth organizations to develop digital platforms aimed at providing non-formal education opportunities to young people in remote areas.
- Encourage movements that are born in schools, universities and other learning environments, and facilitate connections between the private sector and youth organizations.
- Invest in civil society organizations with membership models and organizations, enabling them to extend their programs to underprivileged communities.

### **Policy and institutional framework**

- Develop structured policy frameworks that align with local needs and ensure effective implementation of youth programs.
- Recognize youth work as an official job title, to increase the public perception of youth organizations and support stable structures, with long-term vision.
- Enable National youth councils and civil society organizations to work together to advocate for policies that address the unique needs of marginalized youth.
- Create local mechanisms to enable official registration of new youth organizations focused on non-formal education and volunteering.

### **Capacity building and skills recognition**

- Offer professional development programs for youth workers to enhance their skills in engaging and educating marginalized youth.
- Develop an official system to certify the skills young people acquire through non-formal education and volunteering, enhancing their employability.

- Implement comprehensive diversity & inclusion training programs across different youth-related institutions, to ensure meaningful active inclusion of young people.

### **Inclusion and diversity**

- Include specific measures to promote the participation of women and other underrepresented groups in leadership roles within youth organizations.
- Establish and maintain safe and inclusive spaces where young people from marginalized communities can learn and express themselves.
- Build mechanisms and provide incentives for civil society organizations to reach out to underrepresented groups.
- Offer sustained and targeted support for youth initiatives in rural and remote areas outside the capital. Establishing coaching and mentoring programs can help channel the potential of young people in these regions, empowering them to drive positive change in their communities.

### **Advocacy and engagement**

- Offer incentives for private sector entities to support non-formal education and volunteering programs through funding, mentorships, and internships.
- Incorporate youth-led initiatives into national policy agendas to ensure that young people have a voice in the design of policies affecting them.

## **Methodology**

The policy recommendations in this document are based on desk research and existing policy documents produced by the National Youth Congress of Albania which closely cooperates with all Western Balkans National Youth Councils through several initiatives throughout the year. Furthermore, the recommendations in this policy were reviewed by representatives of the World Organization of Scout Movement (WOSM), a 57 million members youth-led global educational movement, and by members of Scouting organizations in Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, part of the SYSPUC Project. To compile these recommendations, we analyzed existing policy frameworks, such as the European Union's youth policies, Council of Europe recommendations on social inclusion, the latest policy briefs published by Connecting Youth Platform where WB6 NYC has cooperated for years, data gathered through a 2024 comprehensive global Diversity & Inclusion Report by WOSM<sup>5</sup>, and case studies from the SYSPUC project.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://learn.scout.org/diversity-and-inclusion-report-2024>

## Context and Rationale

The social inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities remains a pressing issue in the Western Balkans. Many of these young people, particularly those from marginalized communities such as the Roma, rural youth, and economically disadvantaged groups, face barriers that prevent them from fully participating in society. According to Eurostat, youth unemployment rates in the Western Balkans remain high, with North Macedonia and Albania recording rates of 35% and 27%, respectively, in 2023<sup>6</sup>. This economic hardship is compounded by limited access to quality education. A 2021 report by the European Training Foundation (ETF) revealed that over 60% of young people in the region experience restricted access to formal education or vocational training, which would improve their employability<sup>7</sup>. The absence of civic engagement opportunities further isolates these youth, preventing meaningful participation in civic communities.

Non-formal education (NFE) and volunteering offer tangible solutions to these challenges. NFE bridges this gap by equipping young people with adaptable life and soft skills. Ultimately, these are often decisive for successful employment<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, volunteering enhances social capital, helping young people build networks that support their personal and professional development, enhancing a feeling of belonging and contribution, which ultimately results in an increased desire to give back and an ability to better empathize with other people and larger communities. This need of youth developing their ability to empathize with others is highlighted through results of the 2024 WOSM Data Gathering on Diversity & Inclusion<sup>9</sup>, where close to 20% of the data gathering exercise participants mentioned “Perception” as the primary barrier of diverse racial/ethnic groups participating in Scouting globally, 66.67% mentioned cultural differences being a barrier to new members joining the organization and 61.11% mentioned that economic barriers impact diversity and inclusion, in Europe.

On a transnational level, according to the RAY-MON Research report 2021-2023, 71% of young participants of Erasmus+ projects have reported an improvement in their key competencies, particularly in teamwork, communication, and social skills. The same report highlights that 58% of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds felt more included in society through their involvement in Erasmus+ projects and over 65% of young people engaged in Erasmus+ Youth in Action reported higher levels of civic participation post-project<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, MIYO study conducted by WOSM and YMCA also showed how involvement of young people in Scouting activities has a long-term positive impact on their intellectual, emotional, spiritual, social, physical

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<sup>6</sup> ROMA YOUTH PARTICIPATION, Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)4 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 5 April 2023

<sup>7</sup> KEY INDICATORS ON EDUCATION, SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT 2022, European Training Foundation

<sup>8</sup> <https://ourfutureagenda.org/how-non-formal-education-is-changing-the-world/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://learn.scout.org/diversity-and-inclusion-report-2024>

<sup>10</sup> Effects and outcomes of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Programme, [https://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/RAY-MON\\_Research-Report-20212023\\_20240918.pdf](https://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/RAY-MON_Research-Report-20212023_20240918.pdf)

and character development, across 6 different countries in Europe - Belgium, Czech Republic and Ireland<sup>11</sup>, as well as in Sweden, North Macedonia, and The Netherlands<sup>12</sup>.

The socio-economic landscape of the Western Balkans, shaped by historical conflicts and ongoing transitions, disproportionately impacts rural and marginalized youth communities. In Albania, the National Youth Congress (KRK) has effectively leveraged non-formal education and volunteerism through initiatives like Tirana European Youth Capital titled in 2022<sup>13</sup>, an initiative that financially supported over 400 projects all around Albania and a specific program “Youth Diversity” dedicated to the inclusion of marginalized groups such as youth from remote areas, Roma young people, LGBT communities, other ethnic and religious minorities, etc. Similarly, in Montenegro, the National Youth Network has been instrumental in advocating for and implementing policies that address the unique challenges faced by youth in less accessible areas, fostering an inclusive environment for civic participation and empowerment.

Despite these successful localized efforts, broader systemic challenges persist across the region. Despite its formal recognition and active participation in policy development, the Youth Network of Montenegro faces challenges due to a lack of a concrete funding mechanism from the State, relying primarily on project-based funding, which affects its long-term sustainability and strategic implementation. Meanwhile the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), for example, has highlighted the need for a more cohesive national strategy that aligns regional successes with national policy frameworks<sup>14</sup>. This alignment is crucial to overcome structural barriers and ensure equitable access to educational and economic opportunities for all youth. Addressing these systemic issues requires a robust policy framework at both national and European levels, enhanced by structured support and sustainable funding mechanisms to expand the reach and impact of successful programs. These strategic alignments will not only increase program accessibility but also ensure that the most vulnerable populations in the Western Balkans benefit from consistent and long-term support.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://impactofyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/D3.1-Phase-1-Summary-Report-and-Recommendations-1-1.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://impactofyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/D3.2-Phase-2-Summary-Report-and-Recommendations.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://tiranaeyc2022.al/en/programs/?external=1>

<sup>14</sup> Policy Paper- Enhancing Cooperation among National Youth Councils in the Western Balkans, Connecting Youth platform, CDI

## Recommendations

These recommendations aim to provide a concise and direct roadmap for enhancing the social inclusion of young people through non-formal education and volunteering, emphasizing the need for targeted action from both national and European entities. They are designed to address the unique challenges faced by marginalized youth in the Western Balkans and ensure that these young people have the opportunity to actively participate in society.

### Funding and support

- Establish stable funding mechanisms for non-formal education and volunteering initiatives to ensure their sustainability.
- Increase funding for youth inclusion programs under EU Erasmus+ and other relevant instruments, to support marginalized youth in the Western Balkans.
- Design support instruments that support genuine youth movements, working at the grassroots level with young people from under-represented communities.
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- Offer incentives for private sector entities to support non-formal education and volunteering programs through funding, mentorships, and internships.
- Incorporate youth-led initiatives into national policy agendas to ensure that young people have a voice in the design of policies affecting them.

## An Example of Social Inclusion from SYSPUC

The Strengthening Youth Spaces & Participation for Underrepresented Communities (SYSPUC) project, a program implemented by the European Scout Region of the World Organization of the Scout Movement, co-financed by the Erasmus+ Program, focuses on creating inclusive youth spaces and promoting active citizenship among young people from underrepresented communities in Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The project aims to empower these young individuals through non-formal education (NFE) and volunteering, fostering their integration into civic life and enhancing their skills for the future. Implemented between 2022 and 2025, SYSPUC involved youth workers, community leaders, and young volunteers who collaborated across borders to create sustainable youth programs.

Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are post-communist countries undergoing major economic and political changes. Youth unemployment is high with percentages ranging from 22% in Albania (2023) up to 27% in Montenegro (2023) and 28.57% in North Macedonia (2023) , and youth participation in decision-making processes is lacking, due to multiple causes, such as lack of trust of the young people in the political apparatus, a brain drain phenomenon pervasive in multiple countries across Western Balkans and very new laws when it comes to Youth Participation, Youth strategy or Youth Work recognition.

When implementing SYSPUC, the organization looked at 2 key objectives:

- Empower marginalized youth through non-formal education
- Strengthen youth participation in local and national decision-making processes

With these aims in mind, we set out to support the national Scout organizations in North Macedonia and Montenegro to strengthen their organizational capabilities through solid policies in Safe from Harm (safeguarding of children, youth and adults in Scouting activities), organizational reviews and assessments, project management and fundraising training and leadership development. At the same time, the project enabled Albania to strengthen and grow its country's Scout groups and officially become a member of the World Organization of the Scout Movement<sup>15</sup>, thus enabling access for their young members to youth participation opportunities, as well as access to support structures that will enable them to reach out to new communities of young people in under-represented communities. Through this structural approach to social inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities, the project has enabled access to non-formal education to thousands of young people.

Fostering cross-border cooperation and solidarity between different youth organizations, SYSPUC project has demonstrated that non-formal education and volunteering can be powerful tools for fostering social inclusion among young people with fewer opportunities. By supporting these

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.scout.org/news/news/scouting-albania-joins-176th-member-organization>

initiatives, EU stakeholders can play a critical role in creating more inclusive and engaged communities across the Western Balkans.



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