

Youth wellbeing and support structures before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

*Policy brief and
recommendations*



**Youth wellbeing and support structures before, during
and after the COVID-19 pandemic:
*Policy brief and recommendations***

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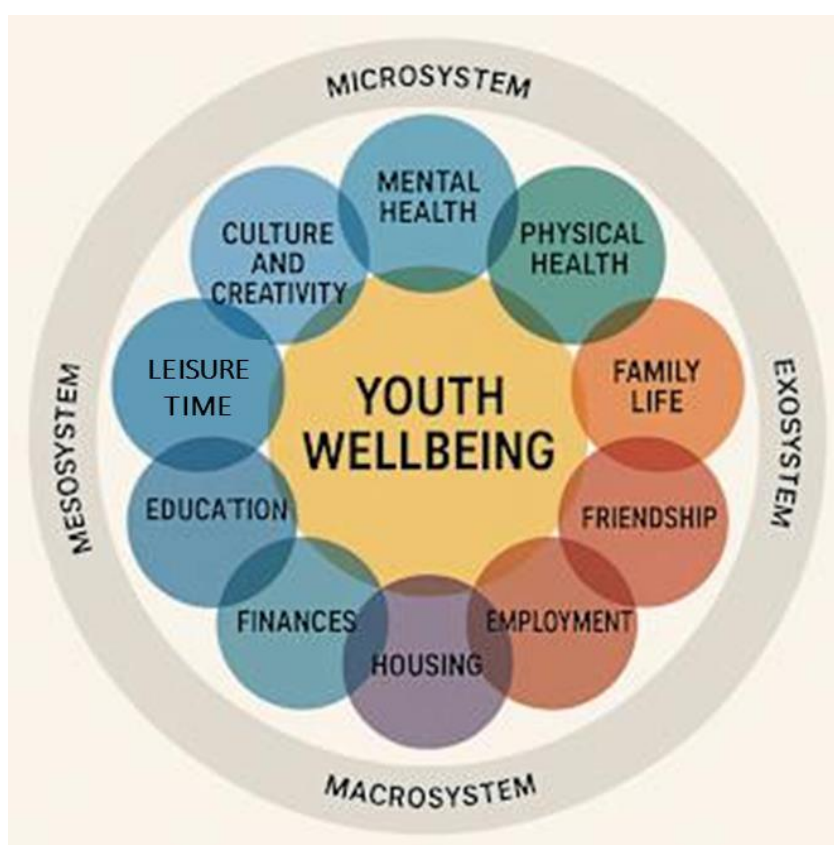
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1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The project *Youth wellbeing and support structures before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*¹² is being conducted in collaboration of the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Maribor, and two associates from the Department of Psychology from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb. The project consists of four research phases, the first is a survey conducted on representative samples of 1,216 young people from Croatia and 1,287 young people from Slovenia, aged 16 to 29, that was finalised at the end of 2023³. The project aims to investigate relations among various systems in the lives of youth in fulfilling their needs that contribute to their overall wellbeing, which is presented by the adapted scheme of the ecological model of youth wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) – Picture 1.

Picture 1. *Ecological model of youth wellbeing*



¹ The project *Youth wellbeing and support structures before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic* is financed by the Croatian Science Foundation (contract IPS-2022-02-8156) and the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (contract J7-4597).

² The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of participants of the YO-VID22 online dissemination event, held on May 21st 2025. The discussants at the event provided constructive inputs that were incorporated into the recommendations section of this publication.

³ The project lasts from October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2025.

2. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

2.1. Survey data

The survey results for Croatia indicate that young people require support from their immediate social environment, public institutions, and civil society organisations during their transition to adulthood. According to the research findings, overall life satisfaction in Croatia has declined in comparison to 2018. Approximately 80 percent of young people report being at least somewhat satisfied with their lives, with fewer than ten percent expressing complete satisfaction. Eight percent of young people are dissatisfied with their lives, with young women having lower scores than young men. Young people report the highest levels of satisfaction with their circle of friends, family life, education, physical health, and employment, whereas they are, on average, least satisfied with their physical appearance. Life satisfaction among Slovenian youth has also declined significantly since 2018. In 2023, the average score was around 7 on a 10-point scale, with women consistently reporting lower satisfaction than men. The lowest satisfaction was recorded in relation to physical appearance, while friendship and family life showed the most significant drops in satisfaction compared to 2018. Overall, only 70 percent of youth reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their lives, a decrease from 77 percent in 2018. Compared to Croatian youth, Slovenians reported lower satisfaction in most domains, particularly in mental and physical health.

Analysis of the frequency and intensity of support young people receive reveals notable age-related differences in both countries. During the pandemic and subsequent periods, adolescents aged 16-19 reported receiving the highest levels of support from their immediate social circles. Conversely, the older cohort of young adults aged 25-29 experienced the least support from the community. This disparity suggests the varying needs and vulnerabilities present across different age groups of youth in relation to their social environments. In both countries, more than half felt valued and important to others, highlighting the role of peer and family relationships as protective factors of youth psychological wellbeing.

During the pandemic, around one-fifth of young people in Croatia felt that their lives rarely or never had meaning and purpose, whereas approximately two-fifths frequently or always experienced a sense of meaning and purpose. The data suggest a more positive outlook for the post-pandemic period during which around ten percent reported that their lives rarely or never had meaning and purpose, while two-thirds stated that they frequently or always experienced such a sense. Although there has been a decline in the proportion of young people who perceive their lives as lacking meaning compared to the pre-pandemic period, the figures remain concerning and necessitate an urgent and tailored response from society and institutions. Among Slovenian youth, a sense of purpose was reported by approximately 60 percent of respondents, yet 12 percent reported that they rarely or never felt their life had meaning, which is an issue more common among women. This reflects a longer-term trend of

increased stress, pessimism, and existential uncertainty, particularly among young people navigating societal and identity transitions. These findings align with global concerns about a growing “crisis of meaning” and suggest the need for targeted programmes that foster purpose, engagement, and optimism.

Slightly more than half of young people in Croatia frequently or always felt they had someone to rely on during the pandemic, whereas in the post-pandemic period, this figure had risen to over two-thirds. Alarming, approximately ten percent of young people during the pandemic and around one-seventh in the more recent period reported rarely or never feeling they had someone to rely on. Parents are the primary source of support for young people seeking assistance, followed by friends, siblings, and partners or spouses. Educational institutions and civil society organisations account for around ten percent of responses, similar to healthcare institutions and religious organisations, whereas professional support from pedagogues, psychologists, or therapists in schools or universities is mentioned by fewer than five per cent of respondents. Similar situation was detected among youth in Slovenia, where during the COVID-19 pandemic, youth experienced a notable decline in perceived social support. Fewer reported having someone to rely on, and many felt less connected, less valued, and lonely. These experiences were linked to increased emotional distress, isolation, and reduced resilience, particularly during periods of lockdown and remote schooling.

In the more recent period, around one-third of young people frequently or always experience psychological exhaustion, while slightly less than one-third report experiences of physical exhaustion. Additionally, slightly more than ten percent of young people believe they will not have a 'happy life'. The proportion of young people in urgent need of support from their close social networks and professional assistance exceeds the proportion who actually sought professional help before the pandemic (approximately seven percent), during the pandemic (around five percent), and after the pandemic (approximately ten percent). Further analyses will identify the most vulnerable young people and propose measures to ensure adequate support for these groups. The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly impacted the mental health of young people in Slovenia, which intensified existing psychological challenges such as depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout. Around one in five youth reported frequent emotional distress, with young women consistently more affected. Feelings of loneliness and a lack of meaning were also widespread, with 15 percent often feeling lonely and 12 percent rarely or never experiencing a sense of purpose. Despite rising mental health needs, professional psychological help remained underutilised, and barriers include stigma, limited awareness, long waiting times for appointments, and inadequate availability of school-based support. These results suggest an urgent action to expand accessible and youth-friendly mental health services, strengthen school and community support systems, and reduce stigma through targeted outreach. Gender-sensitive approaches and better crisis preparedness are also essential to build a more resilient support system for youth moving forward.

2.2. Qualitative insights

Qualitative data were collected through focus groups ($N_{HR} = 50$; $N_{SI} = 30$) and interviews ($N = 10$ in each country) that provided deeper insights into young people's life experiences and support systems. When experiencing positive life events, young people most frequently shared these moments with close friends or family members, highlighting the centrality of close relationships in their emotional lives. Factors contributing to wellbeing most often stemmed from the immediate environment or living conditions. Local community support sources were also cited frequently, which underlines the importance of accessible, community-based resources. The key needs of young people today, as identified in focus groups and interviews, include emotional support, opportunities for meaningful engagement, and a sense of belonging.

Interviews with representatives from civil society organisations ($N = 6$ in each country) and youth-focused institutions ($N = 4$ in each country) revealed references to adaptive strategies and responses to the challenges posed by the pandemic. These responses emphasised the critical role of institutional and community support in mitigating the negative impacts on young people. The findings have significant implications for national and local public policy, public institutions and civil society organisations. There is a clear need for targeted incentives and campaigns aimed at young people, which focus on strengthening immediate social networks and ensuring that support structures are responsive to the diverse needs of different youth subgroups.

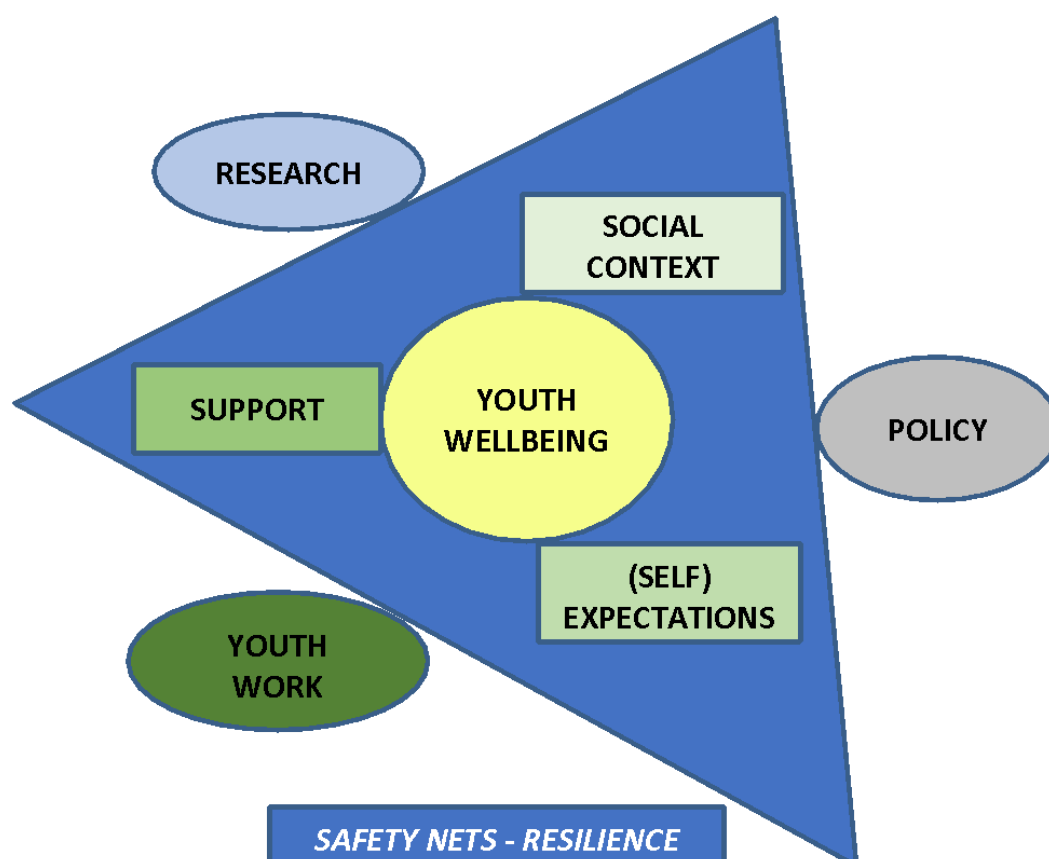
Media content analysis (a sample of 290 unique articles from 15 online portals for Croatia and 150 articles from 10 online portals from Slovenia, which resulted from approximately 40,000 articles on youth and COVID, retrieved from March 2020 to May 2023) indicates a wide range of problems faced by young people during the pandemic period. During the observed period, important events that changed youth narratives were reported. During the early phases of the pandemic, the younger population was often perceived as being less severely affected by the virus and frequently exhibiting asymptomatic or mild cases. At the same time, they were perceived as those who played a significant role in transmission. The media also often reported disruptions to the educational process, with widespread school and university closures, a rapid shift to online learning, and delayed examinations, all of which presented considerable challenges for students and educators. At the level of communities and social networks, concerns were raised regarding the behaviour of young individuals, particularly in relation to non-compliance with public health restrictions. Late phases of the pandemic brought mental health as a critical issue, with increased reports of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, especially among young women, which was worsened by prolonged isolation and the pressures of digital life. Media also recognised that the pandemic intensified difficulties within family settings, including a rise in domestic violence and heightened vulnerability among young people. Many young people faced job insecurity or unemployment at the level of individual and family finances and the labour market status. The media also reported on

the changes in demographic trends, including delayed parenthood, which highlights the pandemic's broader societal implications for youth and society in general.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations based on the research results aim to address the key concerns raised by the respondents, while focusing on creating a more supportive environment for young people to thrive in education, work, and personal development. The emphasis is on practical support, diverse representation, and creating opportunities for meaningful engagement in society. The starting point for conceiving the recommendations was an interplay of the social context, available support (which used to be referred to as „safety nets“), (self)expectations and cross-sectoral cooperation among the policy, research and youth work sectors, which results in a certain degree of youth wellbeing and resilience (Picture 2).

Picture 2: *Factors influencing youth wellbeing*



These recommendations aim to foster an inclusive environment where young people can thrive socially, economically, and politically while contributing actively to the development of their communities. The proposed recommendations target 12 groups relevant for youth wellbeing: 1) young people; 2) youth work and youth workers; 3) the general public; 4) representatives of local and national government; 5) public institutions in general; 6) (mental) health providers; 7) educational institutions; 8) educators; 9) funding bodies; 10) international organisations; 11) journalists and 12) researchers.

3.1. Recommendations for young people

1. Your personal wellbeing is crucial for your prospects, and you should openly seek help and connect with people and organisations that can provide support.
2. Engage in obtaining information on youth rights and access to the rights via various institutions and organisations at the local and national levels.
3. Advocate for your needs by articulating concerns and aspirations clearly to local, national, and international policymakers through forums, consultations, and advocacy groups.
4. Engage in civic participation in local and national decision-making processes, such as participating in youth councils, advocacy groups, and consultations on youth-focused policies.
5. Pursue diverse experiences for practical experience alongside formal education, including internships, part-time work, and volunteer positions to develop a well-rounded set of knowledge and skills.
6. Utilise digital platforms for change to raise awareness about youth issues and engage with decision-makers.
7. Establish and participate in peer support groups to foster a sense of community and collaboration in addressing youth challenges.
8. Advocate for improved healthcare services and access to essential treatments, including mental health support.
9. Advocate for expanding career counselling and financial literacy education to support young people's economic independence.
10. Demand continuity in youth policies by advocating for sustained youth programmes and policies to ensure long-term impact and meaningful participation.

3.2. Recommendations for youth work and youth workers

1. Develop more effective strategies to inform young people about available programmes, support services, and engagement opportunities by utilising diverse media channels.
2. Strengthen advocacy efforts by developing campaigns targeting youth-specific issues such as unemployment, mental health, and climate change.
3. Expand outreach programmes by organising workshops and forums that connect young people and youth workers with policymakers, fostering dialogue on pressing concerns such as mental health, cost of living and career opportunities.
4. Establish partnerships with national and international youth organisations to share best practices and resources for empowering young people globally.
5. Advocate for stable and long-term financial support, such as three- to five-year funding cycles, to guarantee stability and continuity in youth programmes.
6. Implement robust evaluation methods to measure impact and advocate for evidence-based policy improvements.
7. Maintain open communication channels with decision-makers on the local and national levels to influence policies effectively and hold them accountable.

3.3. Recommendations for the general public

1. Increase public understanding of issues affecting young people, including mental health, social inclusion, affordable housing and employment.
2. Promote awareness campaigns and local events that emphasise the significance of youth participation in community and political activities.
3. Promote youth participation in decision-making by supporting local youth councils and forums to ensure young people have a voice in community decision-making.
4. Ensure young people's concerns are taken seriously and foster intergenerational dialogue that values the perspectives and experiences of young people.
5. Advocate for youth representation in media and public discourse by counteracting negative stereotypes and highlighting the contributions of young people to society.
6. Foster intergenerational understanding by encouraging societal recognition of young people's needs, including meaningful engagement in education, devising personal and professional development and achieving work-life balance.
7. Encourage open conversations on mental health and support policies that improve access to mental health services.

8. Foster a culture of dialogue by ensuring young people feel heard by encouraging them to express their ideas and integrating their perspectives into decision-making processes.

3.4. Recommendations for representatives of local and national government

1. Develop comprehensive youth strategies addressing education, employment, mental and physical health, housing, and social inclusion, with publicly available annual progress reviews.
2. Foster genuine youth participation by actively involving young people in all stages of policy development, from consultation to implementation.
3. Adopt mechanisms to ensure accountability in policy implementation and ensure youth programmes are implemented without political interference or delays.
4. Ensure policy continuity and prevent abrupt changes in youth policies by institutionalising processes that transcend political cycles and leadership changes.
5. Improve transparency and accessibility by simplifying administrative procedures for youth organisations applying for funding and accessing public spaces for their activities.
6. Promote diversity in representation by ensuring that youth advisory boards and councils reflect a broad spectrum of young people, including those from different political backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and life experiences.
7. Strengthen partnerships between youth organisations, educational institutions, the private sector, and governmental bodies to create a more coordinated approach to youth development.
8. Create and maintain youth-friendly spaces by establishing accessible public spaces where young people can gather, socialise, and participate in activities free from commercial pressures.
9. Commit to long-term funding mechanisms (three to five years) for youth programmes and services to ensure continuity and reduce reliance on short-term project-based funding.
10. Prioritise investments in youth services and infrastructure by supporting youth centres, cultural hubs, and recreational spaces to enhance community engagement and social inclusion of youth.
11. Improve healthcare access by addressing the shortage of healthcare professionals, and ensure timely access to mental and physical health provision.

12. Develop specific policies and increase funding for programs and activities aimed at ensuring the psychological well-being of youth in schools and local communities.
13. Invest in affordable fitness centres and outdoor spaces to promote physical activity as a means of improving mental wellbeing.

3.5. Recommendations for public institutions in general

1. Strengthen partnerships between youth organisations, local governments, and policymakers to ensure coordinated efforts in youth policy development.
2. Actively include young people in shaping policies through advisory groups, consultations, and participatory budgeting initiatives.
3. Promote transparency in policy-making processes to help young people understand decision-making timelines and procedures.
4. Establish integrated youth services combining career development counselling, training, welfare support, and mental health services under one framework.
5. Create safe and inclusive spaces where young people can access their rights and support without formal appointments.
6. Increase financial support for research into youth needs to develop evidence-based policies.

3.6. Recommendations for (mental) health providers

1. Engage young people in designing health programmes focusing on preventive care and healthy lifestyles.
2. Provide anonymous and fast-track mental health support to young people.
3. Expand access to mental health services by increasing the availability of counselling in schools and youth centres.
4. Partner with educational institutions and social care providers to deliver integrated health services addressing both physical and mental health challenges.

3.7. Recommendations for educational institutions

1. Dedicate a part of the curriculum to the development of socioemotional skills of children and young people.
2. Employ qualified professionals in the fields of psychology, and ensure that pupils and students have access to their services without prior appointment and in accordance with confidentiality principles.
3. Strengthen political literacy modules focusing on democratic engagement, critical thinking skills, and understanding governance structures.
4. Expand training opportunities for educators to better equip them for supporting students with diverse needs, including identification of mental health challenges.
5. Promote an inclusive, non-stigmatising school environment. All members of the school community must work actively to combat stigma related to mental health issues, fostering a climate of acceptance, understanding, and support for all students, regardless of background or specific traits.
6. Collaborate with multidisciplinary support teams and external services. Teachers and school-based professionals should not work in isolation. Effective cooperation with school psychologists, counsellors, and external health and social care providers is essential to ensure that young people receive timely and professional support.

3.8. Recommendations for educators

1. Foster active and empathetic listening towards young people. Teachers and school staff should create safe spaces where pupils feel heard without judgment. Active listening should be embedded in everyday interactions, which would show genuine interest in young people's thoughts, emotions, and experiences.
2. Respect confidentiality while recognising safeguarding responsibilities. Clear protocols must be followed when disclosures raise concerns about a young person's safety or wellbeing.
3. Undertake continuous professional development in mental health literacy. Teachers and school professionals should receive regular training to recognise early signs of mental health issues in order to respond appropriately, and to promote a school culture that prioritises youth wellbeing.

3.9. Recommendations for funding bodies

1. Prioritise youth projects and allocate grants specifically for initiatives aimed at increasing youth social inclusion, wellbeing and mental health.
2. Invest in community spaces by funding the development of sports facilities, cultural hubs, and safe spaces for young people to connect and grow.
3. Finance studies on youth wellbeing to inform evidence-based policies addressing challenges such as unemployment and social exclusion.
4. Ensure long-term investment in youth programmes by establishing multi-year funding schemes to provide stability and enable long-term planning for youth organisations and initiatives.
5. Ensure that funding opportunities are clearly communicated and accessible to grassroots youth organisations, particularly those from underprivileged communities.
6. Streamline grant application processes to enable more youth-led organisations to access financial support.
7. Encourage cross-sector collaboration by fostering initiatives that bring together government, private sector, and civil society actors to support youth-related projects.
8. Develop evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of funded youth initiatives and ensure resources are allocated effectively.

3.10. Recommendations for international organisations

1. Ensure that young people play a central role in shaping international youth policies and programmes.
2. Encourage international partnerships to share best practices and resources for youth engagement, mobility programmes, and policy development.
3. Work with governments to ensure that marginalised groups of young people receive equal opportunities in education, employment, and civic participation.
4. Make funding more accessible to grassroots youth organisations, particularly those in underprivileged communities and those working with vulnerable young people.
5. Provide financial and technical support to youth-led initiatives, particularly in capacity-building and knowledge-sharing.
6. Facilitate efforts to collect and analyse data on youth needs, social inclusion and participation, and the impact of existing policies.

3.11. Recommendations for journalists

1. Actively seek out and amplify the voices of young people themselves, rather than relying solely on expert opinions or statistics. Quote young people directly and ensure their perspectives are central to the narrative.
2. When reporting on wellbeing and mental health, focus on the immediate environment and living conditions of young people.
3. Promote local community support sources, showcasing accessible resources that young people can easily access.
4. Showcase adaptive strategies by reporting on how civil society organisations and youth-focused institutions adapt to meet the evolving needs of young people, particularly in response to challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic

3.12. Recommendations for researchers

1. Conduct comprehensive studies on youth needs by investigating barriers faced by young people in accessing health support provision, employment, education, and political participation to provide actionable insights for policymakers.
2. Assess the effectiveness of existing youth policies and initiatives to identify areas for improvement.
3. Prioritise research on underrepresented populations to develop targeted policy responses.
4. Conduct longitudinal studies to track the impact of youth policies and interventions over time, ensuring continuous policy improvement.
5. Collaborate with youth organisations and policymakers to ensure research findings are effectively translated into practice.
6. Develop participatory research methodologies by involving young people in developing research design, data collection, analysis and data interpretation to ensure research that accurately reflects their life experiences.
7. Disseminate research insights in formats that are easily understood and accessible to young people, practitioners, and policymakers to maximise their impact.

4. SHORT, MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM PRIORITIES

Based on the outlined recommendations targeting specific groups of individuals (including young people, youth workers, journalists, and researchers), as well as organisations and institutions, we have developed a foundation for an action plan that encompasses short-, medium-, and long-term priorities, the implementation of which aims to enhance youth wellbeing and improve their social and economic prospects.

Short-Term Priorities (0-1 year)

1. Strengthening communication strategies to inform young people about available programmes, rights, and support services via digital and offline platforms.
2. Improving access to existing mental health support by offering anonymous and fast-track services through educational institutions, youth centres, and public health providers.
3. Encouraging civic participation by promoting youth involvement in policy making and policy review, with support from youth workers and civil society.
4. Amplifying youth voices in media by supporting journalists and platforms to directly engage with young people and portray their contributions accurately.
5. Supporting peer-led initiatives and CSOs that provide safe spaces for young people to collaborate, access support, and share experiences.

Medium-Term Priorities (1-3 years)

1. Institutionalising cross-sectoral partnerships between youth organisations, educational institutions, health providers, and local, regional and national government in order to ensure coordinated youth support.
2. Investing in professional development of youth workers by providing training in advocacy, mental health literacy, and intercultural competencies.
3. Establishing one-stop youth services that offer career guidance, mental health support, and training in accessible, youth-friendly environments.
4. Establishing multi-year funding mechanisms for youth organisations to ensure programme continuity and reduce dependency on short-term project grants.
5. Embedding socioemotional and political literacy into national education curricula to foster resilience, critical thinking, and democratic participation of young people.

Long-Term Priorities (3-5+ years)

1. Developing, evaluating and reviewing national youth policy documents that are participatory, cross-sectoral, and equipped with transparent progress reviews.
2. Ensuring sustainable youth infrastructure by investing in youth centres, inclusive public spaces, and recreational facilities across urban and rural areas.

3. Fostering intergenerational dialogue mechanisms within policy development and public discourse to ensure young people's perspectives shape long-term societal decisions.
4. Establishing youth work as a recognised profession through national standards, accreditation pathways, and integration into public service institutions.
5. Conducting longitudinal and participatory research into youth wellbeing, participation, and social inclusion to inform continuous policy development, implementation and review.

5. PRINCIPLES OF CO-CREATION

During the online workshops with a range of stakeholders and experts, co-creation was emphasised as a principal method for fostering cooperation among individuals and stakeholders in the youth work triangle. This system entails the active, inclusive, and sustained collaboration between young people, youth workers, civil society organisations (CSOs), institutional actors, and other stakeholders. This participatory approach values the lived experiences and practical knowledge of all contributors, with the aim of designing policies and practices that are both effective and contextually grounded. This process entails:

1. Gathering narratives, good practices, and contextual knowledge

- Collecting real-world narratives and good practice examples from youth workers, representatives of CSOs, and other relevant stakeholders, who are encouraged to contribute written accounts or documentation based on their direct (professional) experiences. These may be anonymised, where appropriate, to uphold ethical standards and protect confidentiality. Desk-based research may complement these contributions, providing background context and comparative perspectives.
- Input from institutions and inter-agency collaborations from public sector bodies, governmental agencies, and service providers who are also invited to share illustrative examples that reveal either compelling examples of cooperation or shared systemic challenges in the design and delivery of youth-related policies and services.
- Development of co-creation frameworks and protocols based on the collected data, thematic protocols or scenario-based frameworks. These may cover a wide range of thematic areas, including outreach and engagement strategies, conflict mediation, youth mental health support, sustainable funding approaches, intercultural dialogue, and the implementation and evaluation of youth policy.

2. Facilitating structured dialogue and collaborative reflection, which encompasses:

- Enabling inclusive, cross-sectoral exchange through facilitated workshops, peer learning forums, or multi-stakeholder consultations, where participants are

encouraged to share insights, challenge assumptions, and contribute to a shared understanding of complex issues in youth work.

- The identification of shared goals and values through collaborative dialogue that enables stakeholders to clarify their roles, recognise interdependencies, and identify areas of convergence that can form the basis for joint action.
- Enhancing reflective practice through critical self-reflection that facilitates consideration of alternative perspectives, evaluation of the effectiveness of current approaches, and exploration of new pathways for action.
- Generating actionable knowledge by co-producing analysis and solutions that can inform ongoing training, capacity building, and organisational development efforts across different institutional and cultural contexts.
- Strengthening joint ownership and accountability through iterative dialogue and shared decision-making, which fosters a sense of collective responsibility for outcomes and encourages sustained collaboration and long-term impact.