



Empowering
young people



YES Forum Strategy

2025 - 2029

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About the YES Forum

Established in 2002, the YES Forum is a European network of national youth and social work organisations. We strive for a Europe where every young person, regardless of their background, has the skills and support they need to reach their full potential. We aim to influence relevant EU legislative, political, and funding processes while supporting our member organisations to use policies and funding to benefit disadvantaged young people in EU member states. Our work is rooted in a commitment to ensuring that youth and social policies are prioritised within the European Pillar of Social Rights, contributing to a fairer and more inclusive Europe.

Introduction

We are currently witnessing many interconnected transformations taking place across our society. On the technological front we have reached a critical turning point with AI and mass digitalisation, while on the societal front, research indicates that there is a growing generational divide across the EU with regards to social values and politics. In the midst of these shifts, it is essential that social inclusion remains at the heart of technological and societal developments, ensuring that no one is left behind in the face of rapid change. As a network, we have a shared understanding that collaboration is required to meet the challenges we face at a national and EU level, and to realise the social rights of disadvantaged young people.

This strategy is built on the knowledge and experience of our member organisations, who work directly with disadvantaged young people every day, supporting them through complex transitions into adulthood. It has been developed through ongoing dialogue across the network, shaped in particular by discussions at the YES Forum General Assembly, insights gathered during our New Year's Welcome event, and valuable feedback collected through our Member Surveys. In its development, members have shared their ideas on how the YES Forum will continue to support, connect, and amplify their efforts, as well as their perspective on how we can meet the challenges we face at a national and EU level.

Now is the right time for us to set a clear direction for the years ahead, while reinforcing our commitment to the empowerment of disadvantaged young people and the professionals who support them every day. This strategy is a living document, one that will continue to adapt and evolve to meet the demands of emerging challenges, and fresh opportunities to make a difference. This strategy builds on the previous - with some small changes made to our GROW objectives to reflect the work of the Secretariat and our member organisations, and the addition of clear thematic priorities and a future focused strategic vision.

With this strategy we offer an insight into what we do, how we work, and the impact we make with our members to the lives of disadvantaged young people across Europe.

Our vision

We envision a Europe where every young person, regardless of their background, is equipped with the skills and support they need to realise their **full potential**:

Where disadvantaged young people:

- ✓ Can access inclusive, high-quality education, training, and lifelong learning opportunities, regardless of their background, and have equal access to employment.
- ✓ Are not at risk of poverty, exclusion and discrimination.
- ✓ Can participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives, locally, nationally, and at the EU level.

Where youth and social work:

- ✓ Is recognised as a vital investment in Europe's future and adequately funded as an essential part of Europe's social infrastructure.
- ✓ Is responsive to shifts in society and the labour market, while meeting the needs of young people.
- ✓ Is delivered by well-trained, competent professionals equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to support young people effectively.

Where decision-makers (at national and EU levels):

- ✓ Prioritise long-term solutions to youth poverty, inequality, and youth unemployment.
- ✓ Actively listen to and engage with professionals working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and young people themselves.
- ✓ Ensure that EU initiatives are accessible, understandable, and relevant to young people's lives.

Youth participation is our core value. Rather than asking, "What can we do for young people?" we focus on "What can we do with them?". We foster a culture of active listening and meaningful engagement, ensuring that young people are not just beneficiaries of our work but active participants. We recognise the diverse ways in which they can contribute to projects and activities, fostering their social engagement and empowering them to shape their own futures. We provide structured opportunities for them to engage with EU institutions, participate in strategic events, and access skills development opportunities. By equipping them with the necessary tools, we enable them to navigate the labour market, advocate for their rights, and actively contribute to a fairer society.

Our core activities

We act as a hub for the exchange of good practices, ensuring that youth and social work organisations, professionals and decision makers can learn from each other.

As a growing network of over 40 member organisations, we recognise the value of face-to-face interaction in fostering meaningful discussions, as many valuable ideas emerge from informal exchange. At the same time, online formats offer accessibility and flexibility. Depending on the context, needs, and available resources, we carefully assess whether activities are best suited for virtual or in-person formats. This balanced approach ensures accessibility, meets participants' needs, and reflects our responsibility to minimise unnecessary travel.

Our events, trainings, and outreach activities create dynamic opportunities for young people, professionals, and decision-makers to collaborate. These opportunities focus on relevant themes such as education, employment and skills, the digital and green transition, and poverty prevention.

We create structured spaces for [exchange](#), and [capacity-building](#), to foster impactful and authentic [policy engagement](#), including our:

- [Annual Event](#) – hosted in a member country, focusing on strategic themes, fostering networking, collaboration, and idea exchange.
- [EU Policy Dialogue sessions in Brussels](#) – providing a platform for members to engage with EU stakeholders, present advocacy work, and connect young people with EU institutions.
- [Periodic drop-in sessions and online meetings](#) – virtual check-ins for knowledge sharing and dialogue across the network.
- [Project Planning Meetings](#) (in-person/online) – a dedicated space to co-develop new initiatives and strengthen collaboration.

Broadly, YES Forum generates and contributes its expertise through:

Transnational activities and projects

By leading and partnering in high-quality flagship activities and projects, we not only upskill youth and social work practitioners but also [generate evidence-based insights](#) that shape our policy recommendations and strengthen our networks collective expertise. By continuously evaluating our success, we refine our methodologies, enhance collaboration across Europe, and ensure that the knowledge gained directly feeds into future projects, policy engagement, and advocacy efforts at both national and EU levels. This integrated approach enables YES Forum to remain [adaptive, responsive, and forward-thinking](#).

Networking and capacity building

We equip youth and social work professionals with the skills and knowledge to navigate EU policies and initiatives, advancing the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (EPSR) and the EU Action Plan for

Social Rights. Through targeted webinars, trainings and workshops, we provide practical insights on emerging topics and EU funding opportunities. To compliment this, we plan to develop a [European Semester](#) Monitoring and Resource Toolkit to help organisations engage effectively with the policy process, and enhance their impact in a changing policy landscape.

Advocacy and policy engagement

We actively engage in advocacy and policy dialogue to amplify the perspectives of professionals and disadvantaged young people, ensuring their integration into decision-making processes and policymaking. Working with partners across Europe, we develop practical recommendations, create policy statements, and co-organise events. We also contribute to external consultations, sharing our members' insights at the EU level and distilling key information from our members. Our contributions extend to the [EESC Liaison Group](#) and the social dialogue with DG EMPL through high-level conferences and expert meetings. We will continue to engage with the European Semester as a mechanism for improving social inclusion at the Member State level.

Our strategic direction 2025-2029

GROW objectives

Our GROW objectives set the overarching direction for our work. They are high-impact objectives that we prioritise in our work and collaboration with others, because they move us closer to our vision. Through our four strategic objectives, we aim to equip disadvantaged young people with the tools to GROW into the individuals they aspire to be, shaping their own paths and becoming active citizens in Europe.



Generate meaningful opportunities to develop skills, upskills and reskill

By incorporating a strong focus on skills development (including upskilling and reskilling) and lifelong learning, young people benefit from greater employability, [career adaptability](#), and economic stability, mitigating their risk of experiencing poverty. As a result, the workforce benefits from a more skilled, resilient, and future-ready talent pool that meets evolving labour market needs.

Raise awareness of the EPSR and key EU initiatives

By raising awareness of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and related EU initiatives – such as the EPSR Action Plan, Youth Guarantee, Union of Skills, and the Anti-Poverty Strategy, the YES Forum ensures that young people and the professionals who support them are informed, empowered, and equipped to engage with these frameworks. This not only helps to shape policies that reflect the realities of disadvantaged young people, but also enhances the visibility and recognition of the youth and social work sector.

Optimise the capacity of youth and social work organisations

Through targeted capacity-building activities, the YES Forum enhances the competencies of youth and social work organisations by offering tailored training, practical resources, and peer-learning opportunities. We place a strong focus on [emerging areas of innovation](#), including digitalisation and the ethical use of AI, ensuring that organisations are equipped to adapt to change, deliver inclusive services, and implement the European Pillar of Social Rights effectively. As a result, disadvantaged young people benefit from more inclusive systems of support, while the workforce benefits from the dissemination of innovative working methods, digital tools, and professional development opportunities.

Widen participation to all young people in decision making processes

For many of the young people we support, EU institutions can feel distant from their everyday lives. Yet through social dialogue with decision-makers, we help them connect the EU with their everyday life, and empower them to become active, informed citizens. By strengthening youth participation and civic engagement, young people gain greater representation in decision-making, increased confidence, and a sense of agency. Meanwhile, decision-makers benefit from diverse perspectives, and society as a whole thrives with a more engaged, proactive, and socially responsible generation.

Thematic priorities and alignment with the EPSR

Our five thematic priorities translate the GROW objectives into key focus areas that address the challenges faced by disadvantaged young people. They are rooted in our commitment to strengthening youth and social policies in connection with the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

These thematic priorities will guide our work from 2025 and beyond, reinforcing social policies and promoting a fairer, more inclusive Europe.

Implementing the EPSR and the new Action Plan to strengthen social rights in Europe

The development of the new EPSR Action Plan marks a critical moment to accelerate progress on delivering social rights across Europe. The YES Forum is fully committed to supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the new Action Plan through targeted initiatives that [promote inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning](#) for

disadvantaged youth, in alignment with Chapter 1. Our network also contributes directly to other EPSR principles, such as “housing and assistance for the homeless” (principle 19) and “access to essential services” (principle 20). We recognise that the principles are deeply interconnected, and that to address challenges like poverty and implement youth policies, a cross-sectoral approach is needed.

Promoting intergenerational dialogue and workforce cohesion, in the context of an aging society

Europe’s youth and social work sector faces a growing crisis as an [aging workforce](#) and skilled labour shortages threaten provision. The share of workers aged 55+ in the EU workforce has risen from 12% in 2004 to 20% by 2019, with the number of 65+ employees in health and social work more than doubling between 2009 and 2019. The European Commission has identified education, healthcare, and social services as among the hardest-hit sectors. As the EU’s working-age population shrinks, many roles may go unfilled, straining support systems for vulnerable groups. Without urgent investment in upskilling, reskilling, and recruitment, these shortages risk undermining the quality and accessibility of youth and social work across Europe. YES Forum has considerable expertise in improving intergenerational dialogue through its role in projects such as BRIDGE, and intends to build on this foundation going forward.

Investing in the skills development, upskilling, and reskilling of the social care workforce

Youth unemployment in the EU remains high (14.6% in early 2025), with 2.86 million young people unable to find work – despite many industries experiencing severe labour shortages. This skills mismatch means that many young jobseekers lack the skills required for in-demand roles, highlighting an urgent need for investment in skills development, [targeted reskilling and upskilling programs](#). In response, the EU has set ambitious 2030 targets, aiming for 60% of adults to engage in training annually and 80% of people aged 16–74 to have basic digital skills. In response to this growing skills gap, the YES Forum takes a dynamic approach to [skills development](#). We aim to equip young people and professionals with the skills they need to adapt to an everchanging labour market. Going forward, we will continue to prioritise upskilling and reskilling as a core pillar of our work, helping to meet EU 2030 targets for skill development.

Evidence-based social work to combat intergenerational poverty

Youth poverty remains alarmingly high in Europe, with 24.5% of young people (15–29 years old), approximately [17.4 million individuals at risk of poverty or social exclusion](#) (2022). This rate is higher than the general population, showing that young people are particularly vulnerable to economic hardship. The pandemic worsened poverty rates, and while some recovery has occurred, many

countries still face staggering disparities. The OECD has warned that it may take five generations for a low-income young person in Europe to reach the average national income, illustrating the [entrenched barriers](#) that prevent young people from breaking out of poverty. In the years ahead, the YES Forum will play an active role in raising awareness and driving solutions on breaking intergenerational poverty, disseminating effective anti-poverty initiatives from Member States, and creating accessible content on key EU strategies so that youth and social workers are equipped to understand, engage with, and implement EU frameworks.

Strengthening the recognition of youth, social care and education professionals

Youth, social work and education professionals play a vital role in promoting social inclusion, and in the day-to-day implementation of social rights, yet their work often lacks formal [recognition and visibility](#). In line with the EPSR, particularly the principles on secure and adaptable employment and social dialogue, YES Forum is committed to raising the profile of youth and social work. Our goal is to advocate for professional development opportunities, greater representation in policymaking, and, in the long term, to [attract a new generation of talented, motivated professionals](#) into these sectors to ensure its sustainability for the future.

Our thematic priorities closely align with Chapter I on “Equal Opportunities and Access to the Labour Market”. These principles serve as the foundation for our efforts to develop [inclusive social policies and practices](#) across Europe.

These principles are:

- Education, training and lifelong learning
- Gender equality
- Equal opportunities
- Active support to employment

They are embedded across all areas of our work, from advocacy and capacity-building to project development and youth participation.

Impact evaluation

The YES Forum operates in a rapidly evolving environment, requiring continuous assessment and adaptation. Our work is dynamic and reviewed through an ongoing process that actively involves both members and staff. The Strategy is complemented by an annual work plan, which sets short-term goals to ensure responsiveness and relevance.

Each year, as part of compiling the Annual Report, the YES Forum Secretariat evaluates activities using both qualitative and quantitative indicators. This process helps members and the Secretariat understand how activities align with broader strategic objectives and their expected impact.

To assess our work, we focus on the following key aspects:

- Regular strategic reflection: The YES Forum Board and Secretariat hold frequent meetings and an annual organisational retreat to review progress and re-establish our future direction.
- Participant feedback: We continuously improve our work by gathering feedback through anonymous surveys and internal debriefs after activities.
- External impact monitoring: We track our visibility and influence through invitations to speak at key events, media coverage, inquiries for information, and social media engagement.

How we work

Sustainable principles

Our sustainable principles tell you more about who we are and how we work. These principles guide our work at every level, from our engagement with members, advocacy and capacity building initiatives, to the design and implementation of individual projects.



Flexibility

Our members work with disadvantaged young people in different countries and contexts across Europe. Legislation, working conditions and the scope of youth and social work differs considerably. Yet our strength lies in our combined knowledge, expertise and competencies. This allows us to be **agile**, adapting quickly to changing circumstances. We recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot address the unique challenges faced by each organisation, so we tailor our support and initiatives to fit the specific requirements of each context, ensuring relevance and effectiveness in every situation.

Support

Our network is one of support. It provides not only practical tools and training but also a strong sense of community. Whether it's through peer learning, **capacity-building activities** or membership initiatives, YES Forum creates a supportive space for youth and social workers to promote good practices and learn from each other. In addition, YES Forum provides practical support that enables

young people to access opportunities (travel, preparation, language support) and share their perspective at local, regional, national and EU levels.

Participation

At the heart of the YES Forum is the commitment to context organisations working with and for young people, while ensuring that youth workers, young people, and the professionals within member organisations are not merely recipients of support but active contributors to the process. Participation is a core principle for our member organisations and the professionals working in them. We foster a culture of active listening and meaningful engagement, one where youth workers and young people have a say in decision-making, projects, and advocacy initiatives. Whether in General Assemblies or project-related meetings, we ensure that the input of our members is valued and actively shapes the work we do. Through structured activities, we provide opportunities for young people to engage with EU institutions and participate in strategic events. This inclusive approach empowers both young people and professionals to collaborate and shape their futures.

Learning

We believe that learning and exchange are catalysts for social transformation. We are committed to making good practice in youth work widely accessible, and ensuring that it is shared, embedded and implemented across Europe. For us, learning extends beyond employability. It is about building young people's resilience and reflective thinking, as well as their confidence and the skills to engage with society meaningfully. It utilises formal and non-formal methods depending on what works best for the individual. For youth and social workers, [upskilling and reskilling](#) is a crucial part of lifelong learning.

Transparency

A strong network thrives on mutual trust, which is why open and transparent dialogue is fundamental to YES Forums approach. We maintain continuous dialogue with our members, involving them in strategic development and financial oversight. We have a clear governance structure and maintain accountability in decision-making. In our flagship projects, young people are engaged at every stage, ensuring that they understand the 'why' and have the opportunity, wherever possible, to shape the activities.

Member organisations

YES Forum's member organisations are diverse in their approaches but share a common goal: empowering young people and promoting social inclusion across Europe. They work with vulnerable young people, NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training), migrants, young people with disabilities, and those facing socio-economic challenges. Their activities span vocational training, mentoring, social work, educational support, and advocacy. Many members also

have a focus on learning mobility, cultural exchange, and community development, fostering a sense of active citizenship and lifelong learning in the young people they support.

Any organisation that shares our mission and values, meets the criteria outlined in the YES Forum constitution, and is based in an EU Member State or EEA country is welcome to join.

As a European network, we also embrace organisations from non-EU European countries that align with our vision and objectives. Eligibility requirements to join the YES Forum network are:

- National and regional organisations engaged in the area of youth and social work
- Public institutions and bodies working in the youth and social sectors
- Youth-led organisations advocating for and supporting disadvantaged young people
- Academic institutions conducting research on youth-related issues
- Universities and training institutes specialising in youth work and social education

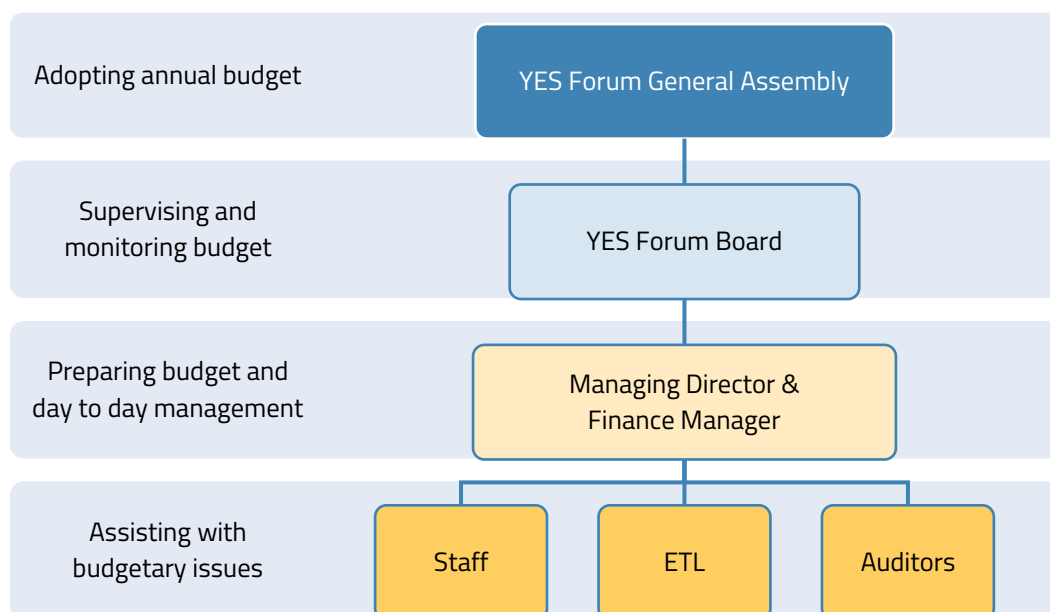
"The YES Forum provides the change to learn from and compare our region with others. This is highly valuable, as our region shares many similarities with other European regions."

YES Forum member

"Being part of the YES forum provides lots of opportunities for networking, collaboration and knowledge sharing with organisations and professionals."

YES Forum member

Organisation structure



The YES Forum is a member driven network where the YES Forum Board are elected by member organisations (YES Forum General Assembly) to oversee the strategic direction and finances. The Board appoints a Managing Director, who manages the Secretariat based in Stuttgart, and works closely with the Finance and Administration Officer to prepare the budget. The Managing Director and the Secretariat facilitates collaboration, advocacy, and capacity-building across the network while maintaining close communication with the Board and members.

Partnership and alliances

YES Forum maintains strong strategic alliances to amplify the voices of disadvantaged youth in EU policymaking. We have an ongoing partnership with the European Commission's [DG Employment and Social Affairs \(DG EMPL\)](#), and actively contribute to strategic dialogue with its Civil Dialogue Team. We also collaborate closely with the European Parliament's [Directorate-General for Communication, Youth Outreach Unit](#). As a member of the [EESC Liaison Group](#) and a contributor to the [EU Youth Test](#) at the EESC since 2024, we play a key role in integrating youth perspectives into policymaking, strengthening the cross-sectoral approach to youth within the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

Additionally, YES Forum is a long-standing member of the [Social Platform](#), contributing to its Social Pillar and European Semester Working Groups. Through this engagement, we work to strengthen effective youth policy within the broader social service sector, advocate for good practice from Member States across the EU to be scaled up, and spotlight the innovative work being done by our member organisations.

To complement its work, particularly in promoting research in the youth sector, YES Forum partners with [YES Innovation & Research e.V. \(YES I&R\)](#). YES I&R is an independent spin-off, founded by individuals from our member organisations and partner networks. It serves as a dynamic platform for innovation and research, supporting the YES Forum's initiatives. Focused on youth, YES I&R fosters creative exploration, develops new approaches, and supports evidence-based solutions. By integrating research into youth work, it drives new perspectives and strengthens initiatives, ensuring that they are based on knowledge and best practices.