

## DELIVERING ON A SOCIAL EUROPE: YES FORUM'S POSITION ON THE 2028 – 2034 MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

### About the YES Forum

Established in 2002, the YES Forum is a European network of national youth and social work organisations working across 22 EU Member States. 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

The YES Forum brings together 89 youth and social work organisations across 22 EU Member States, all of whom deliver transformational support to disadvantaged young people every day. Our members make use of EU funding under the current MFF, including ESF+, Erasmus+, AMIF and other programmes, to provide non-formal education, skills development, employment support, mental health services, and civic participation opportunities to young people often described as “hard to reach.”

We elevate the expertise and lived experience of disadvantaged young people and professionals to provide EU institutions with authentic insights into the implementation of policy objectives. We see first-hand how the investment of the EU opens pathways to education, employment and social inclusion for disadvantaged youth. As such, we are well positioned to provide evidence-based insights that ensure that future MFF programming is as impactful, inclusive and resilient as possible.

The budgetary decisions taken by the EU will be decisive for shaping the post-2027 EU policy architecture and have long-term implications for the realisation of a more Social Europe, directly affecting **the life trajectories of disadvantaged young people across the Union**. As the Commission described it, to meet the demands of the future “we must reunite our society through education and investing people”.<sup>1</sup> For the YES Forum, this requires scaling up targeted, needs-based social investment to ensure that young people facing poverty, exclusion, unemployment, and multiple

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2025) The road to the next multiannual financial framework, [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6d47acb4-9206-4d0f-8f9b-3b10cad7b1ed\\_en?filename=Communication%20on%20the%20road%20to%20the%20next%20MFF\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6d47acb4-9206-4d0f-8f9b-3b10cad7b1ed_en?filename=Communication%20on%20the%20road%20to%20the%20next%20MFF_en.pdf)

forms of discrimination are not left behind. We cannot afford to lose a generation's potential at a time when economic and social transitions demand greater innovation and competitiveness.

## Our policy positions

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Ambitious and sustained investment is vital for Europe to reach its own competitiveness goals, equipping the next generation with the skills needed to drive Europe's economy, and providing the foundation for the EU to implement its ambitious policy agenda, including the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Youth Guarantee, the Union of Skills and the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The MFF has the potential to:

1. Support disadvantaged young people through targeted social investment
2. Address skills gaps and build resilience in the workforce
3. Put EU social policies into practice on the ground
4. Streamline funding programmes and enable high quality youth work
5. Deliver impactful social programmes for disadvantaged young people

We urge the European Commission and Member States to safeguard and scale up investments in social programmes within the new MFF, ensuring that disadvantaged young people are placed at the heart of Europe's social, economic, and democratic future.

### 1. Support disadvantaged young people through targeted social investment

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Young people in Europe are more likely to be affected by poverty than adults. In 2022, 17.4 million (or 24.5%) of young people (aged 15-29) were at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion. This rate has a higher share among eastern EU countries, where 1 in 4 young people experience severe material and social deprivation.<sup>2</sup> The youth unemployment rate in the EU is close to 15%, whereas the NEETs rate of young people who are not in employment, education and training is 11.2%,<sup>3</sup> with wide variations across Member States. Being unemployed, especially at a young age, can result in financial difficulties, being deprived of basic needs (i.e. such as food, housing), social isolation, and mental health challenges, leading to the loss of social dignity.

Beyond their immediate impact, social programmes provide the EU with real insight into how social rights are being implemented across Member States. These programmes generate valuable

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<sup>2</sup> Eurostat (2024) Young people – social inclusion, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young\\_people\\_-\\_social\\_inclusion](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_social_inclusion)

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat (2024) Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics\\_on\\_young\\_people\\_neither\\_in\\_employment\\_nor\\_in\\_education\\_or\\_training](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training)

practice-based evidence which is essential for informing EU-level policy development. Professionals play a vital role in implementing social rights on the ground, bringing principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights into practice, which is why they must be actively involved in shaping the future direction of EU policy.

Through extensive consultation with our member organisations, YES Forum has identified five areas that would substantially benefit from additional resources, targeted research, and investment at the EU level. Each of these priority areas is intended to directly improve, stabilise, and build capacity within the workforce that supports disadvantaged young people, or to specifically tackle and remove the barriers young people face in accessing opportunities. These are:

- Implementing the EPSR and the Action Plan to strengthen social rights in Europe
- Promoting intergenerational dialogue and workforce cohesion in the context of an aging society
- Investing in the skills development, upskilling and reskilling of the social care workforce
- Evidence-based social work to combat intergenerational poverty
- Strengthening the recognition of youth, social care and educational professionals

A competitive Europe is one that prioritises disadvantaged young people having access to vocational education, training opportunities, and lifelong learning, keeping Europe at the forefront of global innovation.

## 2. Address skills gaps and build resilience in the workforce

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Demographic ageing is fundamentally reshaping the structure of European society. According to the Commission, education, healthcare, and social services are among the hardest-hit sectors. Urgent attention is needed to attract, equip, and sustain a new generation of social care professionals. Filling these workforce gaps through targeted upskilling, reskilling, and effective intergenerational knowledge exchange is essential for ensuring sustainable, high-quality support services for disadvantaged youth in the future. However, achieving these objectives will require robust funding for education and training initiatives.

Social work organisations, and the youth and social workers they employ, drive the communication of EU opportunities to disadvantaged young people in their local communities. Young participants who partake in our projects consistently report significant improvements in their confidence, intercultural understanding, and employability, evidenced through robust qualitative and quantitative data.

In addition, social programmes have been proven to improve access to employment and the labour market for disadvantaged young people. The European Commission's meta-analysis of impact evaluations across 22 EU Member States and the UK shows that ESF interventions positively

influence employment outcomes for disadvantaged participants, on average by 7.3% compared to non-participants.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Put EU social policies into practice on the ground

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The MFF represents an opportunity to show our commitment to building a more inclusive and resilient Social Europe for the wellbeing of future generations. Currently, the demand for social services and targeted interventions greatly exceeds available funding. Social programmes have proven instrumental in supporting employment, social inclusion, education, and skills development - yet they remain underfunded relative to their potential impact.

Sustainable funding for social programmes help disadvantaged young people access formal, non-formal, and informal education, and benefit from social services. The EU's anti-poverty agenda relies heavily on ESF+ support in each Member State. Reductions in social funding would jeopardise the goal of lifting 15 million Europeans out of poverty by 2030, a commitment reaffirmed at the highest political level. In addition, increasing earmarked funding beyond the current 12.5% in ESF+ would help strengthen the [Youth Guarantee](#) implementation<sup>5</sup> and ensure that disadvantaged youth can navigate transitions in the ever-changing labour market.

### 4. Streamline funding programmes and enable high quality youth work

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As a membership organisation, we strive to support our members in understanding funding rules. However, the rules are not always clear or easy to navigate and can cause confusion particularly for smaller organisations with limited administrative capacity, as well as those operating in rural communities. The current EU's funding instruments are highly complex and fragmented with multiplicity of rules and criteria hampering access for education and social care organisations<sup>6</sup>. Significant structural and administrative barriers<sup>7</sup> pose an additional challenge for organisations working with disadvantaged youth. Greater transparency, clearer guidance, and practical support are essential to ensure that high quality youth and social work organisations can access EU funding, and support disadvantaged young people across Europe through their work.

Therefore, we stress that post-2027, funding programmes should prioritise: simplified, decentralised and flexible implementation. Funding mechanisms should [be accessible, unbureaucratic and closely reflect the day-to-day reality of the organisations delivering services](#).

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2023) Meta-analysis of the ESF counterfactual impact evaluations - Publications Office of the EU, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/66f78a02-96e1-11ed-b508-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>5</sup> European Parliament (2025) European Social Fund Plus post-2027, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0027\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0027_EN.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2025) The road to the next multiannual financial framework, [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6d47acb4-9206-4d0f-8f9b-3b10cad7b1ed\\_en?filename=Communication%20on%20the%20road%20to%20the%20next%20MFF\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6d47acb4-9206-4d0f-8f9b-3b10cad7b1ed_en?filename=Communication%20on%20the%20road%20to%20the%20next%20MFF_en.pdf)

This includes streamlined application and reporting procedures, user-friendly portals, low-threshold access and targeted funding calls with simplified application procedures.

Continued dialogue and structured feedback loops between the EU institutions and implementing organisations is essential. In taking these steps, the EU can ensure that organisations can access EU funding and make a difference to the lives of disadvantaged young people at the grassroots level.

## 5. Deliver impactful social programmes for disadvantaged young people

### Implementing social rights on the ground through ESF+

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is the EU's main instrument for investing in people and supporting social policies (i.e. employment, skills, education). The achievements of ESF+ are formidable – in 2022 more than 6.8 million people got into work, 10.3 million more people gained an additional qualification, and 3 million more people entered education or training.<sup>8</sup> Evaluations have consistently highlighted the cost-effectiveness of the programme.

We strongly support the ESF+ Committee recommendation that the autonomy of the ESF should be maintained<sup>9</sup>. A potential budgetary restructuring, merging or split of ESF+ could undermine these vital services and will negatively impact the future of youth and social work. Instead, reforms should focus on simplification, and improving resource efficiency and allocation to dismantle administrative burdens and complicated rules. *A substantial increase in funding for ESF+ would contribute to a stronger and more competitive Europe, accelerating economic and social transformation.*

### Enhancing education, skills and opportunities through Erasmus+ and the ESC programme

Erasmus+ and the ESC programme support key EU priorities, including the European Education Area, the EU Youth Strategy, and the EPSR. The impact of the programmes are evident, with Erasmus+ alumni significantly less likely to experience long-term unemployment, and data from CEE countries suggesting that participants are significantly less likely to face prolonged joblessness compared to non-participants.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the programme has been supporting the professional development of youth workers through training and networking opportunities abroad, building capacity in the social care sector. *Increased funding for these initiatives will ensure the adaptability and skill of the social care workforce and ensure that young people can continue to access lifechanging mobility opportunities.*

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<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2022), [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-social-fund-performance\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-social-fund-performance_en)

<sup>9</sup> ESF+ Committee (2024) Opinion on the future of ESF, [https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-12/ESF\\_COMMITTEE\\_DEC\\_2024\\_v3.pdf](https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2024-12/ESF_COMMITTEE_DEC_2024_v3.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> European Parliamentary Research Service (2020), Impact of the Erasmus+ programme, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/642812/EPRS\\_BRI%282020%29642812\\_EN.pdf?](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/642812/EPRS_BRI%282020%29642812_EN.pdf?)

### **Delivering democracy and civic education through CERV**

For young Europeans the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) programme is a cornerstone of the EU's commitment to fostering inclusive, democratic societies. Evaluations of CERV have affirmed the programme's value for money and demonstrated that the investments in it have yielded returns in terms of social cohesion and democratic resilience.<sup>11</sup> To sustain these results, the CERV programme should be extended beyond 2027. *An increase in its budget would strengthen measures to protect civic space amid growing threats to democracy and universal rights*, ensuring that young Europeans have the necessary tools and platforms to be active, engaged citizens.

### **Boosting growth and sharing best practice in Europe's regions through Interreg**

The Interreg programme is a broad EU cross-border cooperation initiative. Evaluations of Interreg projects have demonstrated their ability to enhance social inclusion and cohesion, promote cultural heritage and social innovation, boost economic growth and contribute to a stronger sense of belonging among participating regions.<sup>12</sup> *To amplify these positive outcomes, we recommend that future Interreg programming periods allocate increased funding specifically towards social components*. This would enable the development of more targeted interventions for disadvantaged young people.

### **Horizon Europe: Advancing Social Innovation for an Inclusive Future**

Horizon Europe is an important EU funding programme for research and innovation that addresses global challenges, including social exclusion, and inequality. Currently, expenditure for research and development within the EU fall short of the 3% target – a figure which is decisive for “Europe's future competitiveness”, according to the Commission.<sup>13</sup> *Strengthening Horizon Europe funding in post-2027 will consolidate research and innovation as an EU priority*, contributing evidence-based solutions to global challenges such as poverty.

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<sup>11</sup> European Parliament (2023), REPORT on the implementation of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme 2021-2027 – citizens' engagement and participation, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0392\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0392_EN.html)

<sup>12</sup> European Regional Development Fund (2023), CIBIYYS et al., [https://www.interreg-central.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Interreg-CE\\_Impact-Evaluation\\_Final-Report.pdf](https://www.interreg-central.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Interreg-CE_Impact-Evaluation_Final-Report.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> European Commission (2025) The road to the next multiannual financial framework, [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6d47acb4-9206-4d0f-8f9b-3b10cad7b1ed\\_en?filename=Communication%20on%20the%20road%20to%20the%20next%20MFF\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6d47acb4-9206-4d0f-8f9b-3b10cad7b1ed_en?filename=Communication%20on%20the%20road%20to%20the%20next%20MFF_en.pdf)