



European Week of Regions and Cities 2022

Regions4Youth: Strengthening Cohesion Through Youth Empowerment

REPORT

1. Summary of the session

The workshop moderated by AER Secretary General, Christian Spahr, addressed the key challenges that young generations face and how promoting youth empowerment in the regions can drive territorial, economic and social cohesion.

Speaking on involving young people in local and regional decision-making, Mícheál Ó hÉanaigh, AER Vice President for Youth, Culture & Tourism, highlighted the importance of cross-border cooperation and intergenerational dialogue, as well as the importance of acknowledging the difference between young people, for instance between those in urban areas and in rural areas, as well as differences in socio-economic backgrounds and communities. In this regard, he mentioned initiatives such as AER Summer Academy, the Eurodisney program, the YOUTHopia project and the ongoing work of AER Task Force on Youth in particular on the drafting of a position paper on the topic. Mr Ó hÉanaigh outlined his region, Donegal (Ireland), practices on youth involvement in political decision-making at regional level and highlighted the importance of regional centers, such as Digital Hubs, to foster distance learning, entrepreneurship and the need to ensure young people from rural areas have the same opportunities to access to such focal points.

Aida Jalilzade, co-Rapporteur on Rural Youth at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, addressed the importance for institutions to successfully engage with young people. She outlined the work done by the CoE Congress on making young generations part of the governance process and the involvement of youth delegates in Congress decision-making. In light of her role as co-Rapporteur, Mrs Jalilzade informed speakers and participants of the Report on Rural Youth adopted by the Congress in March 2022, which draws attention to the challenges faced by young people who from in rural communities and how local and regional authorities can ensure a better future for them. She finally stressed the importance of involving youth the implementation of the Paris Agreement and the UN SDGs as mutually reinforcing.

Kieran McCarthy, Member of the SEDEC Committee of the Committee of the Regions, spoke about the CoR's work in involving young people on societal cohesion and the role of the Young Elected Politicians' program in addressing this issue. He pointed out a different trend compared to before where the CoR and other organizations involved in youth are working to listen more closely to young people, besides the traditional exchange channel with the European Commission. Mr McCarthy also highlighted the importance of involving youth in the design of policies and youth mainstreaming, a topic that came out of the Conference on the Future of Europe. He mentioned the creation of a European Youth Charter, a process spearheaded by the CoR, bringing together young people from across Europe on education, youth empowerment and democratic participation, as well as the proposal to lower the voting age to 16 years old. Finally, he stressed the importance for regions to continue promoting their voice vis-à-vis national governments as well as cooperation among regional organizations, with an example being the Cohesion Alliance within CoR.

Raffaele Cattaneo, Vice President for Europe of Regions4, stated that it is important to engage with young

people for their own interest, referring to climate change as a primary issue to involve them better. He added that when it comes to cohesion policy, this must be rendered easier to understand and communicated to young generations, without being limited to the regional administrative dimension. Thirdly, Mr Cattaneo mentioned the importance of developing new tools at regional level to better involve youth in decision-making. Developing new structures to involve young people is key and in this regard he mentioned, as an example, the creation of a Youth Council within the EUSALP project, a cross-border cooperation between macro-regions of the Alpine geographic region, where youth can be directly involved in the decision-making process.

2. Takeaway message

The workshop session entitled 'Regions4Youth: Strengthening Cohesion Through Youth Empowerment' discussed how to empower young generations as a means to foster cohesion policy and ultimately boost economic, social and territorial development. Moreover, the workshop reflected on how to better involve youth in terms of civic, political and democratic participation at regional and local level, as well as how best practices from AER regions and across Europe can be scaled-up. The discussion also focused on how to address the issue of ensuring equal involvement and participation of disadvantaged young people, such as those coming from rural areas.

3. Quotes from the speakers

Mícheál Ó hÉanaigh, AER Vice President for Youth, Culture & Tourism:

' On how to involve disadvantaged young people, a key issue is their access problems to such structures. It is therefore very important to look at examples like that such as focal points in local communities and ensuring that people in rural areas have the same access to these structures.'

Aida Jalilzade, co-Rapporteur on Rural Youth at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe:

'It is important of advising local and regional governments to build stronger relationships with youth, for instance in the form of trainings and setting up Youth Councils in all regions to be able to get closer and listen to them. This is a way of encouraging youth to speak and participate.'

Kieran McCarthy, Member of the SEDEC Committee of the Committee of the Regions:

'Regions must continue to work to make their voice heard vis-à-vis centra governments, so that one day we may have regional funds being managed directly on the ground and for the territory.'

Raffaele Cattaneo, Vice President for Europe, Regions4:

' If you look at cohesion policy just as a technical tool for administration purposes, it will be difficult to get young people on board. However, if we look at cohesion policy in its original nature, that is a set of policies aimed to give solutions to unemployment, inequality, gender equality, conflict solution, all these are topics of interest for young generations. It is therefore a matter of going 'back to basics'.