

Our Youth cannot wait any longer

When I entered into office about 90 days ago it was very clear to me that the most urgent issue I would need to address was youth unemployment. More than 5 million young people in Europe do not have a job at this moment. This is around one in five of the young persons in Europe. In some European countries we are facing youth unemployment rates of around 50 percent. This is unacceptable.

We are, in a number of member states, in danger of leaving a whole generation behind. This is not only irresponsible towards our young people; it will also have longstanding negative economic and social effects in the future. We know that a well-skilled workforce and robust education and training are the most valuable assets for the European economies to prevail in an ever-more competitive global economic environment. So the aim is very clear: Our young people need jobs.

This challenge is, unfortunately, not new. Member States and the European Union have worked together on this already for some time. Two years ago, the Commission launched the Youth Guarantee. Under the Youth Guarantee Member States should ensure that – within four months of leaving school or losing a job – young people under 25 can either find a good-quality job or an apprenticeship or continued education that will help them to find a job in the future.

One aim was to help young people on their path to the labour market by beginning early, during their education. Another was to prioritise the issue of the quality of both jobs and traineeships. Member States agreed to this and have spent the last years developing plans and reforms to make this a reality. In addition to national budgets, the European Commission has made 6.4 billion euro from the EU funds available to support the Member States in these policies and projects, notably through the European Social Fund and the so called Youth Employment Initiative.

The Youth Employment Initiative was intended to provide the most immediate support directly to the most disadvantaged: those young people who are neither in employment, education or training. Funding is today provided to 20 Member States. In practice, this means that a young person can apply to the Public Employment Service and should almost immediately receive a set of employment, training or coaching measures, depending on their individual background and needs.

However, two years after the adoption of the Youth Employment Initiative, the results in Member States do clearly not meet the expectations. Member States have encountered difficulties to provide the necessary payments to start funding activities and measures. Governments indeed have to pre-finance projects from their national budgets before being reimbursed from EU funds. This has been particularly difficult for Member States with the highest levels of youth unemployment since they are also the ones facing more budgetary constraints.

I am convinced that the Youth Employment Initiative can make a difference, but after two years the money has still not or not sufficiently reached the young people on the ground. Now I want to make it work. The Youth cannot wait any longer. This is why my first act in office is to propose a 1 billion euro increase in the pre-financing of operations and activities to promote youth employment.

This will provide the necessary funding for the Member States to urgently launch measures that provide jobs, apprenticeships as well as training and education programmes and the like. This money could directly help up to 700,000 young people who urgently need it. Provided that the Council and the Parliament support this measure the money will be made available already this year.

Of course the European Commission can only take the initiative and make the realization of concrete measures as easy as possible. The projects and reforms themselves have to come from the Member States. This is why I also call on the Member States to make use of this money and to turn it into concrete projects quickly. Together we can make this work. Together we can bring young people back into jobs. Together we can give the Youth of Europe the opportunities they deserve.