

EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 – interim evaluation

EuroHealthNet's input

EuroHealthNet is a not-for-profit partnership of organisations, agencies and statutory bodies working on public health, disease prevention and health promotion. With a long-term commitment to promoting health equity and wellbeing across the life course, EuroHealthNet recognises the importance of an EU-wide youth strategy and the significant impact it can have in protecting and promoting youth's rights.

In what ways could the EU Youth Strategy be improved to better support the needs and aspirations of young people in Europe?

Good health and wellbeing are fundamental pre-conditions to an empowered, connected, and engaged youth, setting the foundations for young people to take part in society. The EU Youth Strategy - which aims to mobilise meaningful civic, economic, social, cultural, and political action among young people - is an important vehicle to bring youth's health and wellbeing needs and aspirations to the fore. It is therefore crucial that the Strategy turns its attention to the core elements that promote youth growth. The EU Youth Strategy should mobilise policy instruments and actions to support the youth force through health-promoting approaches, reinforcing their vision as set out in the [EU Youth Goals](#) below.

Goal 5: Mental Health & Wellbeing

“Achieve better mental wellbeing and end stigmatisation of mental health issues, thus promoting social inclusion of all young people.”

The EU Youth Strategy should mobilise stronger action around mental health, pushing for an EU-wide Mental Health in All Policies Strategy firmly rooted in the underlying socio-economic, environmental, digital, and commercial determinants of health. Ample evidence shows the [increasing toll](#) of mental ill-health on youth, demonstrating the urgent need for dedicated action frameworks at national level which adopt a systems approach to mental health. Approaches to mental health should address the most affected communities and disadvantaged population groups, and be rooted in key settings, such as schools and

workplaces. Creating low-threshold entry points to mental health services and reference points, linked-up with stand-by, non-stigmatising, and inclusive primary health care and social care services should support these goals.

In conjunction with this systems approach, it is equally important for youth to gain skills and capacities for mental health awareness, protection, promotion, and prevention. Recognising the symptoms of mental ill-health will not only help individuals to take measures to improve their own mental health, but also reduce stigma and make it easier to seek professional help. With increasing prevalence of mental disorders in children and young people, including an [alarming rate of suicidal thoughts](#), suicide attempts, self-harm and general life dissatisfaction, such an education is beneficial for the development of a society that recognises mental disorders and works to prevent them. There's a strong imperative to take on a proportionate universalism approach while offering support to all, making sure the youth most in need – poor and socially excluded, with chronic diseases and disabilities, LGBTIQ+ communities - are given better care.

Alongside prioritizing the mental health aspects of the Strategy, it is crucial to also take into account the overall physical health of young people. The strategy should address concerns around the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases and the mixed progress in addressing underlying risk factors. [Adolescents face the risk of a number of adverse behaviours and lifestyle factors](#), such as sedentary lifestyles and unhealthy diets, making them key areas of concern.

To address these challenges comprehensively, the European Youth Strategy should among others, make direct links to the role of healthy nutrition and physical activity in promoting youth's overall wellbeing and mental health. It should advocate for more youth health policies that are systems-oriented and rights-based, to tackle issues holistically.

On the topic of healthy nutrition, the Youth Strategy should have a place in promoting healthy food environments among youth, mandating reduced consumption, advertising and marketing (including in digital spaces) of unhealthy products, such as ultra-processed products high in fat, salt, and sugars. Creating *healthy* food environments that promote mental health and wellbeing and physical health, require a participatory design which is inclusive, and equity driven. The [CO-CREATE project](#) is an example of existing co-creative food policy processes, which aims to provide knowledge and infrastructure on policies, empowering communities to make the healthiest choices the preferred ones.

Physical activity is another area which requires more attention. Opportunities for physical activity among the youth are sub-optimal with just [19% of adolescents and young people meeting the WHO daily recommendations](#). To better support young people, the Strategy should additionally advocate the financing of sports and extracurricular activities on a wider level. Such initiatives not only foster physical and creative activity among youth, but also create a sense of community, engaging otherwise socially excluded communities. This has

been clearly demonstrated in the Finnish [IceHearts](#) model, which prevents social exclusion and promotes the wellbeing of at-risk children and youth through sports programmes with a strong mental health promotion component.

Goal 8: Quality Learning

“Integrate and improve different forms of learning, equipping young people for the challenges of an ever-changing life in the 21st century.”

A critical factor that influences youth’s health and wellbeing is the educational system and school environments. They play a vital role in not only providing academic learning, but also in shaping youth’s physical, mental, and social development, with lasting impacts across their life course. Educational systems can also contribute positively to their communities, providing opportunities for active citizenship, inclusivity, and good quality employment, as outlined in Youth Goal 8.

For this to happen, a health-promoting approach to education is fundamental, where the culture and structure of educational settings enable young students to learn important skill sets (e.g. socioemotional learning, critical thinking, health literacy) and develop healthy habits around physical and mental health, nutrition and prevention¹. Such settings can also support students in engaging in the digital transition safely, by improving their digital literacy levels, digital etiquette, and their knowledge about active civic participation and their rights in the digital space. This is particularly important in view of the increasingly rapid uptake of new digital technologies and solutions across different settings, as seen for instance in schools (e.g. online platforms, interactive learning tools) and the evolving world of work (e.g. platform workers, gig economies and teleworking).

This approach goes beyond the traditional boundaries of the health and education sectors since it provides a wide focus on all the determinants of health. In fact, it necessitates collaboration with various other sectors, including social policy, agriculture and food systems, active transport and urban planning, environmental protection, arts, and culture, among others. By bringing these sectors together, health-promoting approaches can create a healthy setting for students and their communities across the socioeconomic gradient, providing them with the capacities, opportunities, and motivation to take up healthier behaviours.

¹ WHO and UNESCO (2021) Making every school a health-promoting school: implementation. Available [here](#).

The EU Youth Strategy can therefore act as a lever for enabling policy conditions co-created with and for youth to encourage increased investments in health-promoting educational settings. It can help push for more supportive learning environments which place the health of youth at the epicentre and equip them with the right skills set, competences and knowledge that will holistically support their participation in society and entry into the workforce.

Goal 10: Sustainable Green Europe

“Achieve a society in which all young people are environmentally active, educated and able to make a difference in their everyday lives.”

Youth are increasingly sensitised to the impact of climate change, air pollution and environmental degradation, as demonstrated by the numerous youth-led climate movements such as [“Fridays for Future”](#). [Studies](#) have also demonstrated that climate anxiety (ecoanxiety) and dissatisfaction with government responses to climate change are highly prevalent among young people, who report negative impacts on their daily functioning. This has been further reiterated in a [special Eurobarometer](#) on the Future of Europe, where 9 out of 10 young Europeans agree that tackling climate change can help improve their own health and well-being.

Amidst efforts for a European green transition, the European Youth Strategy should also take a strong stance in ensuring that the path to sustainability is just and inclusive - achieving a ‘triple win’ where initiatives and policies can create enabling environments which simultaneously improve health, the environment and health equity. Youth have made it clear that the “business as usual” attitude is not an option – calling for more accountability from governments on better legislation, infrastructure, and enforcement to foster the structural changes needed to address environmental concerns. [Such changes](#) can include mandatory standardised EU-wide labelling on food products (which highlights health, social and environmental sustainability aspects), taxation of environmentally harmful products and subsidies for green and sustainable products, incentives and infrastructures which promote active transport, enshrining the “right to repair” in legislation and strict enforcement against environmentally harming practices and entities.

The EU Youth Strategy should be an important mechanism in ensuring that youth’s voices and concerns about the environment are heard and more importantly, acted on. A socially just and inclusive green transition cannot happen without the active involvement of young people, who are needed in shaping the types of policies and environments which can create a triple-win.