AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Concepts, current challenges, priorities and workable models for youth policy in the Flemish Community and in Europe

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EU NEEDS YOUTH

Colophon

TITLE
An inclusive society for young people: Concepts, current challenges, priorities and workable models for youth policy in the Flemish Community and in Europe

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"There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river.
We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

- Desmond Tutu

Content

Introduction

'Leaving no one behind' is one of the key values of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2016). The reality of many children and young people today is different, as Belgian psychiatrist Dirk De Wachter summarises in the following comparison:

> *"I compare our zeitgeist to a speedboat called TINA: There Is No Alternative. The boat is sailing very fast and on the front deck, fancy young men in expensive suits and with the wind blowing through their hair are emptying magnum bottles of champagne, while their beautiful wives coo with pleasure. But at the back, people fall off the boat because it goes so fast and there are no railings. Because of the clamour, the successful young men don't even notice. (...) that the speedboat should slow down and that it needs a strong railing at the back, a strong social security to prevent people from falling into the water." (De Wachter, D., 2019)*

Today, there is not always a solid railing that keeps children and young people from falling off the boat. Provisional rights are under pressure: inclusive education seems difficult to put into practice, outreach and residential youth care are increasingly unsuccessful in supporting young people quickly and adequately. The protection rights of children and young people seeking refuge and homeless children are not always guaranteed. Recent crises reveal the precarious living conditions in which children and young people sometimes grow up. The COVID-19 crisis showed clearly how quickly children and young people can fall off the boat if they do not have access to the internet, if they do not learn with their heads as well as their hands, if they live in a care facility or in a cramped flat. The energy and inflation crises revealed how many families rely on financial support as soon as life becomes more expensive. Racism and discrimination are becoming increasingly normalised.

Although their rights are under pressure, children and young people are not passive bystanders. They protest against global warming, they side against exclusion and discrimination and raise critical questions about how the police and judiciary system function. They pick up litter, raise money and support campaigns against bullying. But equally, they focus on their own development and small social circle, their faith in politics and collective action wanes and some resort to violence in their protest against social institutions.

How do we create more equal opportunities, for and with the next generations? This is the question we try to answer here. At the conceptual level, we will provide a sample of commonly accepted definitions and theoretical frameworks about building an inclusive society. We then look at the actions we take as adults, the structures we build and the policies we implement. At the Flemish, federal and European levels, numerous policy initiatives have been taken and policy recommendations formulated in recent years. We analyse them and pour them into a clear overview. We also list what young people themselves think about this topic and we examine the role of youth work to develop an inclusive society, both in Flanders and in Europe. We then contrast policy texts and measures with the current needs of children and young people facing social exclusion. Finally, we look at workable strategies and models that help achieve social inclusion. These are mainly models that enable participation in and through an empowering educational offer. This offer broadens and strengthens children's and young people's capacity to act and is closely connected to their lifeworld: their neighbourhood, school and leisure time.

In this way, we hope to contribute to Belgium's presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2024. Our sincere thanks go to the Department of Culture, Youth and Media of the Flemish authorities for entrusting this task to us and for following up and supporting our work with great care.

1. Definitions and descriptions of concepts

In this first chapter, we trace the evolution from the first mention of 'social exclusion' to the most recent understanding of intersectionality. We describe how concepts came into being and what they mean today. After discussing social exclusion and social inclusion, we explore the concepts of inclusive society and social cohesion, and we end with more recent concepts such as superdiversity, intersectionality, power and privilege.

1.1 Social exclusion

> *"The concepts of 'social inclusion' and 'exclusion' are closely linked. It is difficult to discuss social inclusion without also talking about social exclusion."* (Zemni & Ben Yakoub, 2018).

1.1.1 Emergence and development of the concept of 'social exclusion'

In 1974, French secretary of state for social affairs René Lenoir was the first to refer to the (social) exclusion of certain target groups as a basis for his policies. This moved policy away from mere acts of charity towards disadvantaged groups to the recognition of structural exclusion mechanisms and inequalities. In the following years, the terms poverty and social exclusion were increasingly mentioned in the same context. In the 1990s, the European Union also introduced the concept of exclusion in its social policy. Its 'programme against poverty' turned into the 'fight against social exclusion' (Zemni & Ben Yakoub, 2018). Social exclusion and social inclusion became concepts on a global scale as key concepts in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2016).

> *"Although there is no universally agreed definition or benchmark for social exclusion, lack of participation in society is at the heart of nearly all definitions put forward by scholars, government bodies, non-governmental organisations and others. Overall, social exclusion describes a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state." (UN, 2016)*

In the early days of the concept, poverty is the first form of social exclusion that is identified and addressed as such by policymakers. Social exclusion and poverty are both causes and consequences of each other. Belgian professor Jan Vranken defines poverty as *"a network of social exclusions that extends across multiple areas of individual and collective existence. It separates the poor from the generally accepted lifestyles in society. The poor cannot bridge this gap on their own."* (Vranken, 2010).

Poverty and social exclusion affect the interaction between individuals and society and have lasting individual consequences. Social exclusion reduces the likelihood of positive contacts with social institutions and increases the likelihood of negative interactions with society and its institutions. It also makes people vulnerable to new negative experiences in the future. Belgian professor Nicole Vettenburg (1989) described this dynamic in her theory of social vulnerability.

> *"'Social vulnerability' refers to a situation of a group (or a member of this group) that is vulnerable in its contacts with the social institutions. This group risks experiencing a number of negative effects (control and sanctions) and tends to benefit less of the positive offer." (Vettenburg, 1989)*

The term 'vulnerable' refers to the interaction between the individual and society.

> *"The potential of social vulnerability lies in the structural position of the group, i.e. belonging to the lower social class. Characteristic of this class is the lack of authority to incorporate and valorise their own culture within the socially recognised culture. This means that their interests are not defended, that their specific needs and requirements are met less and that they cannot defend themselves against the negative stereotypes that exist about them." (Vettenburg, 1989)*

On an individual level, poverty and social exclusion lead to an increase in chronic stress and a decrease in emotional well-being. This has an impact on (the development of) people living in poverty. This influence continues to affect their lives, even when people are no longer in a situation of material poverty. Poverty experts call this the inside of poverty (binnenkant van armoede in Dutch).
Insights into the chronic state of stress in which people in poverty find themselves also help to better understand why people in poverty make certain decisions that seem irrational to those who are not in this position. (Luijben, et al., 2019; Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2020; van Sprundel, M., 2020).

1.1.2 Extending social exclusion to other groups in society

As the term 'social exclusion' became more popular as a policy term, more and more groups in society were covered by it. The term 'poverty' was broadened to 'poverty of opportunities' (kansarmoede in Dutch) and discrimination based on age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion, origin, economic status or migration status was included in the concept of social exclusion (UN, 2016). The interpretation shifted to inequality of opportunities and the terminology evolved to 'people with fewer opportunities'. The United Nations uses (among other things) the definition of social exclusion of Ruth Levitas and her colleagues from 2007:

> *"Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole" (Levitas et al., 2007, p. 9).*

Levitas and colleagues (2007) distinguish three domains and associated subdomains in which social exclusion manifests itself:

- Resources: material/economic resources; public and private services; social networks and social support
- Participation: economic participation; social participation; culture, education and skills; political and social participation
- Quality of life: health and well-being; living environment; crime, damage and criminalisation

1.1.3 Special attention to poverty and child poverty remains necessary

The concept of 'social exclusion' clearly shows that poverty is more than a financial deficit and that not only people in poverty are affected by this mechanism. The concept points out that structural and social exclusion mechanisms and individual, psychological consequences are closely related and mutually reinforcing. All forms of exclusion have in common that prejudices and stereotypes lead to exclusion and discrimination. In addition to the undeniable merits of the concept, it also contains some risks. For most groups facing social exclusion, the intrinsic characteristic at the root of that exclusion is not the problem *in itself*. Age, gender, disability, residence, migration background, religious beliefs, gender identity and/or sexual orientation are not problematic in themselves, but their social consequences are. The state of poverty itself is problematic and changeable, in contrast to the above-mentioned traits.

In recent years, the sensitivity and attention to child poverty has increased, as can be seen in specific initiatives such as funds and policy measures, but also in targeted research, for instance on indicators of material deprivation in children. European researchers developed 17 indicators, specifically for children. A child is deprived if its family cannot financially afford three or more of these seventeen items below. The higher the number of items that a child cannot access, the more severe the deprivation (Guio & Van Lancker, 2023). The 17 items are:

1. New clothes
2. Two pairs of shoes of the same size
3. Fresh fruit and vegetables on a daily basis
4. Protein on a daily basis
5. Age-appropriate books at home
6. Outdoor recreational equipment (bike, inline skates etc.)
7. Age-appropriate indoor games
8. Regular leisure activities (sports, music etc.)
9. Celebration of special occasions (birthdays, religious holidays etc.)
10. Invite friends occasionally to come and play and eat
11. One week of holidays per year away from the home
12. Participation in school excursions
13. Replacing worn-out furniture
14. Absence of overdue payments
15. Access to the Internet
16. Adequately heated accommodation
17. Access to a car for own use, when needed

According to that definition, 12.8 percent of children in Belgium live in poverty. There are major regional differences in these figures: 21 percent in Brussels, 17.3 percent in Wallonia and 8.5 percent of Flemish children, according to a recent study commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation (Guio & Van Lancker, 2023).

1.2 Social inclusion

1.2.1 From exclusion to inclusion

Social inclusion is the answer to social exclusion, as in this European Commission definition from 2003:

> *"Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights" (European Commission, 2003, p. 9) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52003DC0773*

The concept of 'inclusion' was originally developed for the education of persons with disabilities (Van Mieghem, et al., 2020), but has since been extended to other target groups who experience social exclusion. The figure below, based on the definitions in a United Nations Recommendation on Inclusive Education (2016), clarifies the distinction between exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion. (UN CRPD, 2016)

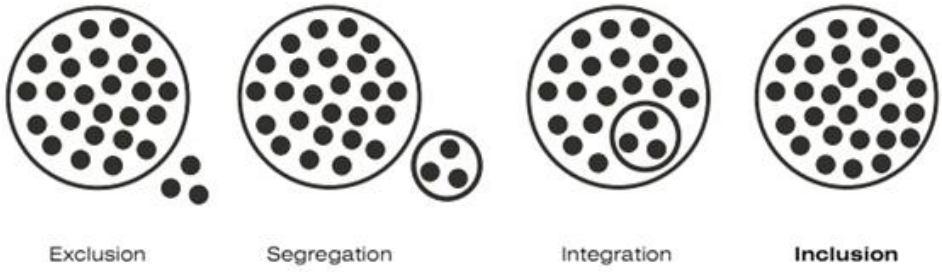


Figure: Zemni & Ben Yakoub, 2018

The recommendations of the United Nations focus specifically on education, but you can also extrapolate them to other areas of life such as housing, employment or leisure.

- Exclusion occurs when students are directly or indirectly denied access to education in any form.
- Segregation occurs when the education of students with disabilities is organised in separate environments designed or used to respond to a specific disability, isolated from students without disabilities.
- Integration is a process of placing persons with disabilities in existing mainstream educational institutions, as long as the former can adapt to the standardised requirements of such institutions.
- Inclusion is a process of systemic reform that involves changes and adjustments in the content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with the aim of providing all learners of the relevant age group with a fair and participatory learning experience and environment that best suits their needs and preferences. Allowing students with disabilities to take part in regular classes without

accompanying structural changes in, for example, organisation, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies is not inclusion. Moreover, integration does not automatically guarantee the transition from segregation to inclusion.

United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities general comment No. 4 (http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRPD/GC/RighttoEducation/CRPD-C-GC-4.doc)

1.2.2 Does everyone belong?

Our society, institutions and organisations take shape based on the habits, customs and commonly accepted norms of the (invisible) majority. The same applies to interactions between citizens. The dominant groups in society have the biggest influence on the organisation of society. Anyone who does not fit in feels that society insufficiently takes their presence into account. This exclusion does not so much happen actively, but rather passively (Ghys, 2017). To compensate for this 'passive exclusion', additional, specific and corrective measures are taken for certain groups and a specific offer is created or specific policy is developed. These measures often create positive effects for the target group concerned, but therefore also make the conscious choice for inclusion more difficult. You can understand that phenomenon through the law of the handicap of a head start (Ruts, 2020).

Inclusive policy implies that specific measures and institutions are avoided or, better, unnecessary. It entails a process of change in which organisations, services, governments and society at large make adjustments to their working methods to make it possible for all citizens to participate fully in society. It is essential to include (the experiences and perspectives of) all citizens into this process of change and into the organisation of society. An inclusive policy should not only achieve inclusion as an end result, the policy itself should also be created in an inclusive way.

1.2.3 Inclusion and participation

Participation lies at the core of inclusion: participation as a goal (people take part, join in), participation as a means (people co-decide, cooperate) and participation as a starting point (De Visscher & Reynaert, 2013; Vanobbergen, 2016).

Forest and Pearpoint (1992), founders of inclusive thinking in social sciences, define inclusion as "*inviting those who have been left out (in any way) to come in, and asking them to help design new systems that encourage every person to participate to the fullness of their capacity as partners and as members*" (In: Zemni & Ben Yakoub, 2018).

The quotes below give a good indication of how inclusion and participation go together:

> *"Dealing with difference is not simply tolerating the deviation, but daring to question the norm that produces the deviation." (Naïma Lafrarchi)*

> *"Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is creating a new space that is better for everyone." (George Dei)*

> *"'We' cannot integrate 'them' so long as 'we' remain 'we'; 'we' must be loosened up to create a new common space in which 'they' can be accommodated and become part of a newly reconstituted 'we'." (Parekh, 2000: 204)*

For Therborn (2007), achieving social inclusion is a five-step process:

- **giving visibility**: all people are present, are recognised and have a voice
- **consideration**: the needs and priorities of all people are valued and addressed by policymakers
- **access to social interactions:** all people participate freely in social activities and networks
- **rights**: legal rights and the right to social benefits are protected and if rights are violated, this is challenged
- **resources to fully participate in society:** financial and related resources, such as time, accessibility and respect, support full participation

The inclusion paradigm shows many similarities with views about (un)equal opportunities and social justice. The starting point is that society gives citizens opportunities to develop their lives through education, healthcare, social protection, assistance, culture, sports, youth work... But some groups are able to make more use of these opportunities than others and/or make better use of them. They can participate more easily in society, as the figure below shows.

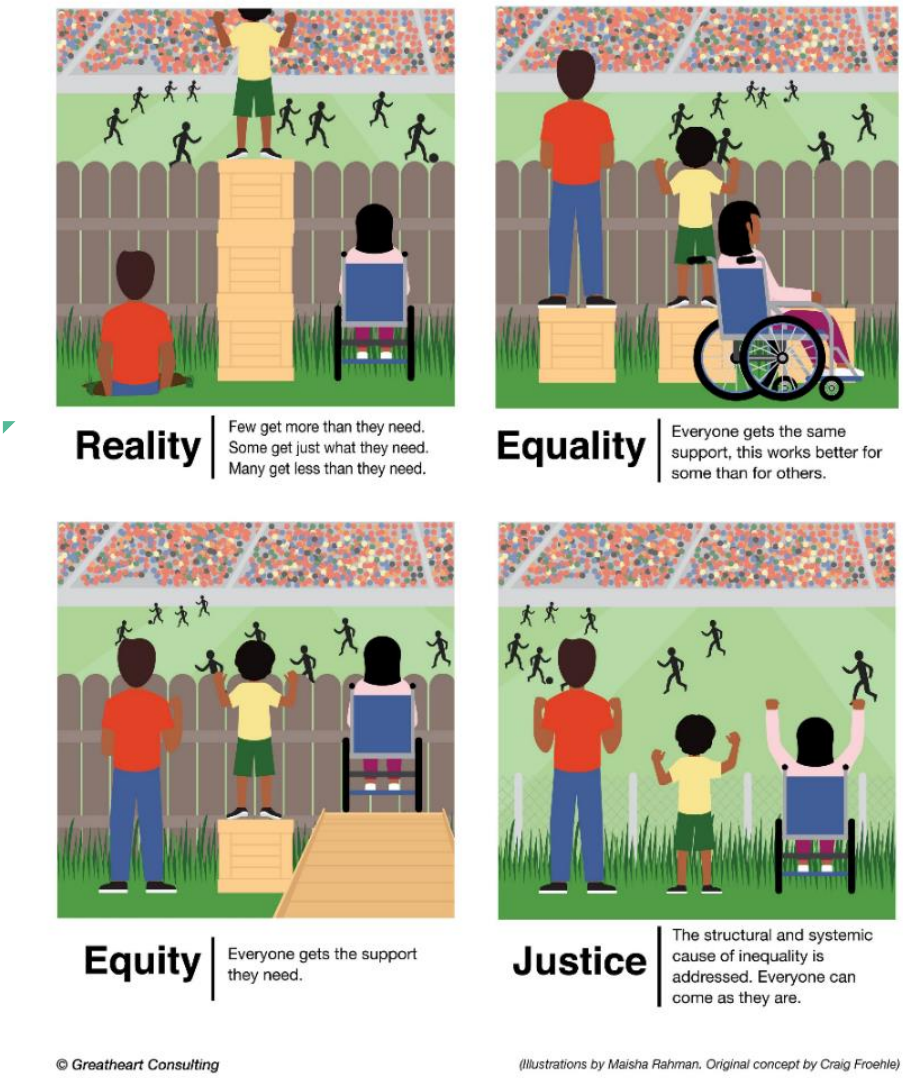


Figure: Maisha Rahman (Greatheart Consulting)

To increase access to opportunities, society offers tools and resources and lowers thresholds for the whole population. When this is done in the same way for all citizens, these instruments and levers do not sufficiently succeed in eliminating inequality. This is referred to as the Matthew effect of accumulated advantage: those who are already doing well or are successful continue to improve. Hence the plea to make extra efforts tailored to certain target groups. This is referred to as 'equity' or 'proportionate universalism'. In addition to good basic services for everyone, additional support is provided for those who need it. In this way, guaranteeing equal opportunities justifies unequal treatment. However, the ultimate goal remains a just system where unequal treatment is no longer necessary to ensure equal opportunities.

1.3 Inclusive society

If (social) inclusion is a process of change, then you could consider an 'inclusive society' as the ultimate goal of this process. An inclusive society can manifest itself at different levels: at the micro level in the concrete interaction between people, for example in a classroom, at work or during leisure time; at the meso level in the way we shape organisations and institutions; and at the macro level in the way we organise our society, in the public space, in the rules and laws for organisations and citizens and in the support that society provides to citizens, institutions and organisations to achieve inclusion.

1.3.1 Micro-level Inclusion

- Geert Van Hove (2005) puts forward four values to concretise inclusion at the micro level. He derives them from the 'circle of courage':

  - Belonging. That means more than 'being present'. 'Belonging' means that someone is included in the group, that all group members work together on the same 'project', each based on their own strengths.
  - Appreciation for what people are capable of and who they are. Everyone wants to be loved. It is important to cooperate with others and achieve things that everybody can proudly look back on.
  - Establishing real relationships. People are looking for equal relationships in which they are interdependent.
  - Contributing to friendship and group dynamics. It is important for people to be able to 'give' and not only to be dependent on others.

In an article from 2016, Virginie Cobigo and her colleagues describe social inclusion as:

> *"We propose to define social inclusion as the experience of being recognised and accepted as an individual in spite of individual differences, having interpersonal and reciprocal relationships, and belonging to a group. Social inclusion occurs when individuals choose their own life, have meaningful activities that they feel capable of performing, and have a decent living accommodation. In addition, social inclusion is better understood in a context that is accessible and safe, and whereby the community has positive attitudes towards individual characteristics and choices, community members support each other, and demonstrate a commitment to monitoring social inclusion barriers and facilitators, including anti-stigma initiatives." (Cobigo, V., et al., 2016)*

The authors see social inclusion as the result of the complex interaction between a person's personal characteristics and the environment. Social inclusion means that people can take on a social role that meets their personal expectations, choices and needs, but that is also meaningful to the environment because it meets the expectations, choices and needs of the environment and corresponds to the culture in the group. A social role is considered successful if the person is considered competent and validated by others. When both parties are satisfied, they build mutual trust and create reciprocity and a sense of belonging, which in turn strengthens mutual satisfaction.

Beno Schraepen (2015) also describes inclusion as a relational concept:

> *"The relationships make the difference between integration and an inclusive perspective. Inclusion in leisure activities means that children and young people with disabilities are able and allowed to choose in which activities they want to engage, that they can participate in the organisation of their choice and can choose with whom they want to connect. It means that they feel respected, can contribute to the whole and can show and develop their competences." (Schraepen, B., et al., 2015)*

1.3.2 Meso-level inclusion

In their article on the inclusive society, Sammi Zemni and Yoachim Ben Yakoub refer to a scheme by Shore and colleagues (2011) that depicts inclusion at an organisational/policy level as a successful combination between 'belonging' and 'being valued'.

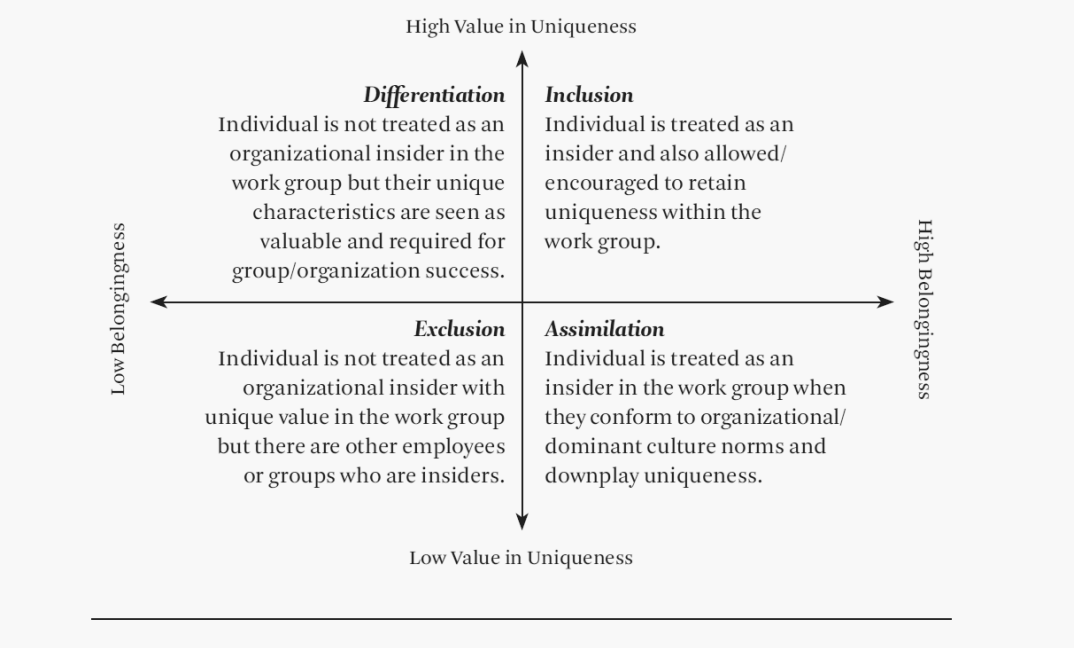


Figure: Zemni & Ben Yakoub, 2018

1.3.3 Macro-level Inclusion

We also see this combination in analyses at the macro level. The term 'inclusive society' stems from discussions in the run-up to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, the predecessor of the current Sustainable Development Goals. The world leaders who participated in the World Summit in Copenhagen in 1995 described an inclusive society as:

> *"A society for all, in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play. An inclusive society is based on the fundamental values of equity, equality, social justice, human dignity, rights and freedoms, as well as on the principles of embracing diversity. A society for all is*

equipped with appropriate mechanisms that enable its citizens to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, and ultimately shape their common future." (UN, 1995)

The pursuit of an inclusive society is also one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, security and strong public services states: *"promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, ensure access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and accessible institutions at all levels."* (UN General Assembly, 2015). In addition to the right of each individual to play an active role in society, the Belgian researchers Sami Zemni and Yoachim Ben Yakoub (2018) also distinguish a second dimension of an inclusive society: fundamental respect for the individuality of each person.

"An inclusive society is a society in which people with different beliefs (or no beliefs), opposing ideologies, from different classes or social groups, with various sexual orientations, skills or limitations… feel included. The 'others', the ones who do not correspond to this self-definition, should not just be 'tolerated' in an inclusive society, but respected for who they are, as persons we can learn from in a rational way. In this way, an inclusive society respects everyone in their dignity." (Zemni & Ben Yakoub, 2018).

The feeling of belonging is an important result of an inclusive society. It is seen as a vital human need. A 'sense of belonging' can be defined as: '*a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places* (Hagerty et al., 1992 in Allen, et al., 2021).

At first glance, the sense of belonging seems to be a useful concept (Valle Painter, 2013). It extends from the micro to the macro level and can include both the connectedness in homogeneous groups and heterogeneous groups. In Bowling Alone, sociologist Robert Putnam argued that a sense of belonging is the outcome of strong social networks that in turn fuel feelings of solidarity. Putnam makes a distinction between *bonding social capital* within one's own group and *bridging social capital* to other groups in society. Putnam emphasises the importance of bridging capital in terms of solidarity and social progress. This reinforces a widely held notion that it is important that people are more broadly connected than only in groups of people with whom they have many similarities. This notion is usually captured in the term 'social cohesion' (see below).

Where social inclusion can theoretically be given an individualistic interpretation, namely providing people with the necessary rights, resources and access to services to build their own lives, thinking about an inclusive society also points to the importance of interaction between people. Inclusion is linked to participation at the micro, meso and macro levels: full participation, co-decision-making and a deep and existential experience that one 'belongs'. The basic notion is that everyone by definition is part of society and that the organisation of society has to be adapted to different needs and perspectives. Inclusion does not only affect and benefit individual citizens, but also society as a whole.

1.4 Social cohesion

Social inclusion and social cohesion are strongly linked. Typically, social cohesion is seen as the result of social inclusion. This connection draws the attention of the general population to the fact that social inclusion does not only benefit the groups that are excluded, and that getting rid of social exclusion is more than a question of justice. An inclusive society holds the promise of a more robust, productive and peaceful society in which no talent is lost and in which everyone is better off. It is a win-win situation that should encourage everyone who is doing well, to solidarity, also out of well-understood self-interest.

The term 'social cohesion' was introduced at the end of the 19th century by Emile Durkheim - one of the founders of sociology - who explored what holds a society together in times of rapid and fundamental change, for instance during the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century. Although the term has been around for a while, it remains a rather vague concept that has been given different interpretations over the years, without generating a solid theoretical framework (Dierickx, Vandenbroeck & Devlieghere, 2023).

Yet, scientists continued to search for overarching elements to bring order to the many interpretations of social cohesion. The Bertelsmann Stiftung worked on a theoretical framework: *the social cohesion radar*, in which they conceptualise social cohesion as:

> *"The quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitude and behaviour of its members. A close-knit society is characterised by resilient social relationships, a positive emotional connection between its members and the community, and an explicit focus on the common good." (Delhey et al., 2018, p. 430)*

The researchers distinguish three key concepts that in turn encompass three domains. The first key concept of 'social relations' includes social networks, trust in people and acceptance of diversity. The second concept of 'connectedness' refers to identification, trust in institutions and perception of fairness. The third and final concept is' focus on the common good' and consists of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules and citizen participation.

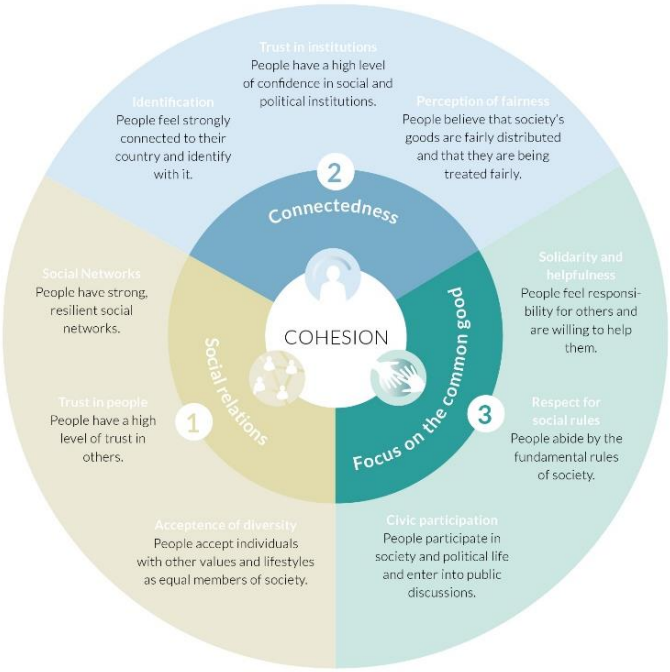


Figure: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018

1.5 Power and diverse voices

The concept of 'social exclusion' originated in the analysis of what it means to live in poverty. 'Inclusion' was initially developed as a paradigm for the social participation of people with disabilities. Over the years, both terms have become useful frameworks for a wider group of people who experience exclusion. This seems to be the case as well with a number of more recent terms and concepts that stem from the analysis of exclusion based on gender, ethnicity and migration background. This is the case for superdiversity and, above all, intersectionality. These concepts led to new insights about exclusion, renewed the focus on power and privilege, and revealed new manifestations of social exclusion.

Power

By power, we understand the ability to exert influence or control over people, events, processes and resources. Power is connected to inclusion. The extent to which persons are part of society also determines the influence they can exert on it or what role they can play in it. For centuries, it was self-evident in most places of the world that unequal positions of power and privileges were a legitimate consequence of social class, origin, property, social status, gender, age etc. Due to the social struggle from the 19th century onwards and the evolution in our society in terms of democracy and empowerment, many of these power mechanisms seem to have disappeared, although they live on implicitly and subtly in our society and currently various acquired rights

are being questioned again. Recent demographic evolutions and new insights into how exclusion functions expose these power mechanisms and reveal new ones.

Superdiversity

While the term 'diversity' refers to all aspects in which people differ from each other, the term 'superdiversity' is in principle limited to ethnic-cultural diversity. The term was first used in 2007 by Steven Vertovec to describe London's changing population. Superdiversity refers to both a quantitative increase in ethnic-cultural diversity and a qualitative increase. Based on the description of Jan Blommaert (2013), Maurice Crul (2013) and Dirk Geldof (2019), migrants nowadays arrive from all-over the world. This leads to fragmentation of the backgrounds of newcomers: ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious... The look of Western cities is changing: neighbourhoods are becoming more layered and within the integration sector the diversity of clients is increasing. Governments are tightening their asylum system: access to formal rights is being restricted to an ever-smaller group and migration more frequently happens illegally. As a result, migrants have different residence statutes and social positions and often live in very precarious living conditions.

Superdiversity also implies a different relationship of migrants to their host country. New migrants do not immediately feel the need to settle in permanently. With the rise of the internet and mobile communication technology, migrants remain connected to their country of origin but also to acquaintances, family members and communities (diaspora) around the world. They are much less dependent on their immediate environment for their social contacts. They live in international networks rather than in local communities. An evolution that increasingly applies to the broader society.

Superdiversity in itself is not positive or negative. The term describes a change in our society, not only in the composition of the population, but also more fundamentally in the way people live together and form communities. Many self-evident norms about 'living together' and 'forming communities' are in transition:

- Our society is becoming less stable and homogeneous than before.
- People are much more mobile than before.
- A person is no longer a member of one culture, one community, and no longer speaks one shared language with others.
- People do not have a single identity, but many different identities.

There is no longer a stable, homogeneous society in which newcomers could merge, even if they wanted to. Who needs to adapt to whom? Who decides that? If there is no clear majority anymore, everyone has to adapt to everyone. We are all newcomers to a superdiverse society. Nevertheless, we notice that there are power relations that are stronger than the numerical or democratic majority. But those power relations are not included in the concept of 'superdiversity' per se.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality or intersectional thinking has a number of similarities with superdiversity, but some essential differences. Intersectional thinking has its origins in the activism of African-American feminists and is characterised by an explicit attention to processes of disadvantage and privilege that arise from the interaction between gender, 'race'/ethnicity, class and sexuality. The term 'intersectionality' itself was coined by American lawyer and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw.

In intersectional thinking, the various forms of oppression and discrimination are studied as a whole and in their mutual interlinkages. Social inequality occurs along different axes that intersect. Individuals in a society experience privileges or discrimination and oppression on the basis of a multitude of factors and the interaction between those factors. As with superdiversity, intersectionality refers to the diversity within diversity. Exclusion mechanisms affect people's lives differently, depending on the intersections at which people find themselves. But while superdiversity in principle only describes a certain reality, intersectionality questions the power relations. Whether or not people possess a certain trait has a significant impact on their position and opportunities because certain characteristics are considered more important or more 'the norm' than others.

These standards are often unconscious and implicit. As a result, people are rarely aware of the power relations: male, white, middle class, straight... The norm seems normal. It has, as it were, the power of self-evidence and it creates 'others'. The deviant from the norm is pointed out (the so-called *marked difference*), whereas the norm is not questioned, because it is considered self-evident (Ella vzw, 2014). That's why, for instance, white people do not see that they are part of the diversity in society. They rather see themselves as a kind of canvas against which diversity stands out.

Intersectionality can make invisible exclusion mechanisms visible, for instance, exclusion mechanisms at the intersection of 'gender' and 'ethnicity'. Even with a successful equal opportunities policy for women combined with a thorough equal opportunities policy for ethnic minorities, women from ethnic minorities will still face barriers and disadvantage (Ella vzw, 2014). Intersectionality also shows how interventions or organisations that focus on a particular group can miss their goal if they do not take the unequal social positions within that group sufficiently into account. Intersectionality also makes it clear that we accept some exclusion mechanisms at a certain intersection more easily or consider them normal. It is, for instance, more often taken for granted that jobs are more difficult to combine with motherhood than with fatherhood. Female film stars, politicians, scientists or business leaders are more likely to be asked this question than their male colleagues.

The 'other question' is a concrete tool to see intersectionality at work. It is a thought experiment based on the question: "What would this story look like and how would I understand it if this person had different ethnic traits and a different age? Or would be a man instead of a woman? Would have had a longer or shorter educational path?" In its 'Handleiding intersectioneel denken' (Intersectional thinking manual), Ella vzw describes how intersectional thinking is a way of thinking, acting and looking at your surroundings that invites you to:

- **inclusive and dynamic thinking** in which thinking about different categories does not happen according to binary standards but according to different social dimensions that are not separate from each other. It avoids putting people in boxes because the different dimensions are made more apparent.
- **empathic thinking** in which we put ourselves in other people's shoes: "What would I find reasonable if I were in the other's position?" It reduces the likelihood of exclusion based on (a combination of) certain factors such as ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation...
- **acknowledging the interdependence of the categorisation principles that operate simultaneously**, influence each other and play an interconnected role.
- **multidimensional thinking** because everyone's identity consists of multiple dimensions: for example, someone is not only male, but also white, highly educated, young and homosexual at the same time. These dimensions influence each other in the way they are organised: this person's class background determines to a certain extent how he is a man, his gender determines how his ethnic identity is expressed, his age determines to a certain extent how he expresses his sexual orientation.

New insights into power and privilege

Intersectionality shows power relations. Intersections of identity traits do not only lead to exclusion or discrimination of people in a lower power position, they also bestow privileges on people in a higher power position. Having a male position, owning and occupying a white ethnic position (in Western Europe), belonging to the middle or upper class, being heterosexual and originating from the country where you live are all ingredients that can tempt us to see our positions and privileges as 'normal' and self-evident, stripped of or outside power relations (Wekker & Lutz, 2001 in Ella vzw, 2014). In the late 1980s, Peggy McIntosh, director of the North American Liberal Arts College for Women in Wellesley, Massachusetts, brought the concept of privilege to the fore. McIntosh describes white privileges as "*an invisible weightless backpack with special amenities, cards, passports, code books, visa, clothing, tools and blank checks.*" (McIntosh, 1988; 1990)

White privilege refers to a set of automatic and conscious or unconscious benefits that a white skin colour bestows on you: knowing that you will see people like yourself on TV, that they will be portrayed positively, that history lessons will be relevant to your community, that no one in the shop will keep an extra eye on you, that you will not be confronted with racial discrimination for housing or employment, and that you can speak up in public without 'speaking for your own community' – or simply: that you will be heard and interpreted as an individual with an opinion.

Privileges reveal how some groups in society unconsciously and unintentionally benefit from a social organisation and order that disadvantage others. The aim is not to take away those privileges, but rather to abolish them so that everyone can share them. The 'gain' of one person does not mean a 'loss' for the other person, although this is sometimes experienced as such. Abolishing privileges is a continuation of the empowerment and emancipation movement, but this struggle can be hindered by the fact that the exclusion mechanisms are implicit and

unintentionally present in wider sections of the population and not only in a particularly powerful group.

1.6 Conclusion

As a common line of thought about social inclusion, we notice that people with certain traits or a combination of traits encounter prejudice, invisible norms, habits and practices in society. As a result, they are excluded from social interaction, reap less of the benefits of society and are more likely to be confronted with the negative sides of our society. These people have less power or influence to question or modify social norms and practices, even though this does not keep them from engaging in a social struggle for change. Besides recognising the resilience of these groups, there is an additional task for the people in a dominant power position who usually benefit from the status quo. They should become aware of their privileges and what they take for granted, and, together with the excluded, initiate a process of change so that organisations, services, institutions and society as a whole become a place where everyone can participate fully and is respected in their individuality. In this way, we build a society that is better for everyone in the long term.

A European report on diversity and inclusion in education endorses this conclusion:

> *"Inequity is the result of disadvantage and/or discrimination due to any number of personal and social characteristics, such as sex, gender, ethnicity, migration background, religion, disability status, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. People in these social categories are disadvantaged not per se, but because structures are in place that often deny access to resources (such as quality mainstream education or appropriate services) or create barriers to accessing such resources. Structures are the ways in which societies are organised, and these give rise to relative advantage or disadvantage due to the complex interconnectedness of social categories and power (Nurse and Melhuish, 2021)."* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2023)

As a society, we project a lot of hope on future generations to realise that inclusive society. In the next chapter, we give an overview of the current policy measures fostering an inclusive society for young people.

2. Flemish and European youth policy related to an inclusive society for young people

2.1 In Flanders

The website *Youth Wiki: Europe Encyclopaedia of National Youth Policies* provides a fairly recent overview of the measures in Flanders that promote social inclusion. The overview distinguishes four target groups: people living in poverty, low-skilled people, people of non-Belgian origin and people with functional disabilities. The document describes the competent policy levels and policy bodies at federal and Flemish level. Various services and organisations are described that help shape and/or shape policy. The document also provides an overview of the relevant Flemish policy measures and initiatives in terms of accessibility, inclusion and awareness-raising.

The Flemish policy in the field of social inclusion of young people is framed within the international conventions that the Belgian state has ratified, such as the Convention on Human Rights and on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Flemish policy is also subject to European legislation (see below) and federal laws. For example, article 23 of the Belgian constitution states that everyone has the right to a dignified life. To this end, the laws guarantee the following economic, social and cultural rights: 1° the right to employment; 2° the right to social security, health protection and social, medical and legal assistance; the right to decent housing; 4° the right to the protection of a healthy environment; 5° the right to cultural and social development and 6° the right to family benefits.

The federal level in Belgium is responsible for policies in the areas of employment, social security and social integration. At the federal level, the Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting (Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service) is responsible for research and information collection on poverty reduction, for consultations between policymakers and people in poverty and for advice and recommendations. The federale antidiscriminatiewet (anti-discrimination act) is also in force in Flanders. At the federal level, Unia monitors compliance with this legislation. In March 2023, Flanders terminated its cooperation with Unia and founded the Vlaams Mensrechteninstituut (Flemish Human Rights Institute) instead. Unia remains competent in Flanders for complaints about discrimination related to federal areas of competence.

More specifically at the Flemish policy level, various policy areas are involved in the social inclusion of young people: education, care, youth policy and tourism. Within education, the Flemish authorities provide learning support for children and young people with disabilities and distance learning via Bednet for children with long-term illnesses. The authorities promote equal educational opportunities and are committed to combating educational deficits and early school-leaving. Young newcomers are taught in onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige nieuwkomers (entry-level education for foreign-speaking newcomers).

Within youth policy, the jeugddecreet (youth decree) foresees the recognition and funding of nationally organised associations, information and participation associations and cultural educational associations, including project grants. In the funding conditions and project grants, the Flemish authorities pay specific attention to equal opportunities and accessibility. the jeugd- en kinderrechtenbeleidsplan (youth and children's rights policy plan) is another pillar of the above decree. It puts emphasis on leisure activities for all children and young people. The Flemish authorities also support professionalised youth work for children and young people with fewer opportunities (in 'vulnerable positions' in Dutch) and supra-local youth work with children and young people with disabilities. The Flemish project Komaf ('Join us') facilitates the support of local youth work in the field of inclusion and diversity. Through research, the Flemish authorities also map the participation in and experience of leisure activities of various groups of children and young people. It is also responsible to draw up the 'state of youth' through a monitoring exercise carried by the Jeugdonderzoeksplatform (Youth Research Platform) and other research instruments.

The Flemish policy in the field of care and family affairs promotes social inclusion through various instruments. On the one hand, there are primary instruments for the general population with extra attention for children and young people with fewer opportunities: child benefits (via the groeipakket, 'growth package'), (inclusive) childcare, educational support through Huis van het Kind ('House of the Child') and local social policy. OverKop-huizen ('Time-out Houses') and Jongerenadviescentra (Youth Counselling Centres) offer accessible support and information to young people. Through the so-called BOA decree ('buitenschoolse opvang en activiteiten', after-school care and activities), the Flemish authorities want to increase the accessibility of after-school care and activities. As for secondary measures, the Flemish authorities provide specialised, professional support through integral youth care and care for people with disabilities. People with disabilities can also rely on financial support and resources via the Vlaams Agentschap voor Personen met een Handicap (Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities).

The toerisme voor allen decree (tourism for all) accredits and grants social tourism organisations and supports youth accommodation centres to reduce thresholds to participation. Through the Iedereen Verdient Vakantie initiative (Everyone Deserves Holidays), the Flemish authorities mediate between a network of touristic and other partners on the one hand, and people who experience barriers to go on holidays on the other hand. The Flemish authorities are also committed to inclusion in and through sport. At the local and regional level, both federal and Flemish resources are used to ensure the accessibility of leisure participation, through targeted resources for socio-cultural participation, through the Uitpas (Leisure Pass) and other instruments that grant discounts and through the support of (supra-)local networks for leisure participation.

The Flemish authorities also explicitly focus on poverty reduction through dialogue with poverty associations, project grants and the Vlaams Actieplan Armoedebestrijding (Flemish Poverty Reduction Action Plan) under the responsibility of the coordinating minister. Through its policy on equal opportunities, citizenship and integration, the Flemish authorities are building a

harmonious society in which everyone gets opportunities to move forward. The policy in this field is implemented through project grants, dialogue and research. Here too, the policymakers use the open method of coordination to shape its equal-opportunities policy across different policy and life domains. Flanders adopted this method of governance from the European Union. In the next part, we present the European policy development that aims to achieve an inclusive society for young people.

2.2 In Europe

For a broader overview of the European and international policy agendas on children, youth and children's rights, we refer to this overview document from 2023. You can find an overview of the EU policies in the field of social inclusion via this link. In this text, we focus on policies on social inclusion of children and young people. This policy domain lies at the intersection of two key values of the European Union: social inclusion and children's rights. Various European legal texts reflect these values. We will start with an overview of these texts. Next, we go into more detail about the relevant policy texts. We mainly focus on recent policy texts. If you want to go further back in time, you can consult this overview study by Eurofound from 2015.

2.2.1 Social inclusion of children and young people as key value of the European Union

First, we take into consideration the EU treaties that form the binding agreements between EU member countries. They set out EU objectives, rules for EU institutions, how decisions are made and the relationship between the EU and its member countries. Every action taken by the EU is founded on treaties (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/collection/eu-law/treaties/treaties-force.html).

Article 2 of Treaty on European Union (EU, 2016a) describes the values of the European Union, amongst others, in terms of social inclusion.

> *"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail." (EU, 2016a)*

Article 3 of the same treaty states that the aim of the EU is *"to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples."* Article 3 further states that the EU:

> *"shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child." (EU, 2016a)*

Also in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (EU, 2016b), various articles refer to social inclusion:

> *"Article 8: In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women.*

Article 9: In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health.

Article 10: In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall aim to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation." (EU, 2016b)

In articles 165 and 166, the treaty describes how the European Union contributes to the education and training of young people, organises exchange programmes and promotes sports.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EU, 2016c) sets out those fundamental rights that must be respected both by the European Union (EU) and the EU countries when implementing EU law. The charter is legally binding. In accordance with Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union, it has the same legal value as the EU treaties. It applies to EU institutions in all their actions and to EU countries when they are implementing EU law. The Charter defines the following relevant rights:

"Article 21 Non-discrimination: Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.

Article 22 Cultural, religious and linguistic diversity: The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.

Article 24 The rights of the child:
1. Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. They may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity.
2. In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration
3. Every child shall have the right to maintain on a regular basis a personal relationship and direct contact with both his or her parents, unless that is contrary to his or her interests.

Article 26 Integration of persons with disabilities: The Union recognises and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community."

Article 34 Social security and social assistance:
1. The Union recognises and respects the entitlement to social security benefits and social services providing protection in cases such as maternity, illness, industrial accidents, dependency or old age, and in the case of loss of employment, in accordance with the rules laid down by Community law and national laws and practices.
2. Everyone residing and moving legally within the European Union is entitled to social security benefits and social advantages in accordance with Community law and national laws and practices.

3. In order to combat social exclusion and poverty, the Union recognises and respects the right to social and housing assistance so as to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources, in accordance with the rules laid down by Community law and national laws and practices." (EU, 2020)

With the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017, the European institutions created a framework to guide European and national policies on in the field of social policy. They set out twenty principles to create a more just and inclusive Europe, including the right to quality and inclusive education (principle 1), equal opportunities (principle 3), care for and protection of children (principle 11), inclusion of persons with disabilities (principle 17), housing (principle 19) and access to essential services (principle 20). The EU also links an action plan to the European Pillar of Social Rights, with particular attention to social protection and inclusion. The Porto declaration announcing this action plan states:

"We are committed to reducing inequalities, defending fair wages, fighting social exclusion and tackling poverty, taking on the objective of fighting child poverty and addressing the risks of exclusion for particularly vulnerable social groups such as the long-term unemployed, the elderly, persons with disabilities and the homeless." (Council of the EU, 2021)

These European values are not only an expression of a political vision, they are also endorsed by European citizens. In the Citizens' Panels in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, social inclusion emerges as one of eight central themes:

"A European Union based on solidarity, social justice and equality. Indeed, a great concern for citizens is to find equal conditions and rights in different areas: healthcare, social services, education and life-long learning, equal opportunities for inhabitants of rural and urban areas, to take account of demographic considerations. In the future, Europeans, across Member States and regions, should no longer face discrimination due to their age, residency, nationality, gender, religion, or political preferences. They should be offered decent living standards, wages and working conditions. The EU needs to be more than an economic union. Member States need to show more solidarity towards one another. We are a family and should behave as such in situations of crisis." (Council of the EU, 2022)

Young people also point out social inclusion as the most important priority for the European Union (see below). How do the institutions of the European Union translate these widely held values into policy?

2.2.2 European policy in the field of social inclusion of children and young people

2.2.2.1 EU-wide initiatives

Several comprehensive policy initiatives in the field of youth, such as the EU Youth Strategy, the EU youth programmes and the European Year of Youth pay explicit attention to social inclusion. In addition, the European Union is also developing targeted policies at the intersection of youth and social inclusion. And the EU's external actions also focus on the social inclusion of youth and the development of an inclusive society.

EU Youth Strategy

The EU Youth Strategy provides the framework for the EU's youth policy from 2019 to 2027. The strategy is made up of three core themes - engage, connect and empower - and 11 European Youth Goals. European Youth Goal 3 is about 'inclusive societies', enabling and guaranteeing the inclusion of all young people in society. It targets to:

- Provide legal protection and enforce international legal instruments to fight against all kinds of discrimination and hate speech, recognising that young people are subjected to multiple forms of discrimination.
- Strengthen outreach of information to marginalised young people[1], to ensure they are aware of spaces, opportunities and experiences available to them.
- Ensure that all marginalised young people have equal access to formal and non-formal learning environments, addressing all the dimensions of inclusion.
- Strengthen the capacities of educators to work with marginalised young people.
- Provide more spaces, opportunities, resources and programmes to foster dialogue and social cohesion, and combat discrimination and segregation.
- Strengthen social support by implementing the right to a living wage, fair work condition, universal access to quality health care, and ensure specific measures for marginalised young people.
- Ensure that marginalised young people are participating in all decision-making processes and are key players, particularly in processes concerning their own rights, wellbeing and interests.

European Youth Goal 2 on equality of all genders and European Youth Goal 9 on space and participation for all are also related to social inclusion. To this end, European Youth Goal 9 targets to:

- Ensure equal access to everyday decision making for all young people from different backgrounds.
- Ensure safe virtual youth spaces are accessible to every young person which provide access to information and services as well as ensure opportunities for youth participation.
- Ensure sustainable funding, common recognition and development of quality youth work in order to strengthen youth organisations and their role in inclusion, participation and non-formal education.

EU youth programmes

Erasmus+ - the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport in Europe - places a strong emphasis on social inclusion. The programme explicitly focuses on the outreach to young people with fewer opportunities.

[1] The trio presidency ES-BE-HU agreed not to limit the implementation of European Youth Goal #3 to marginalised young people, but to extend this concept to 'young people with fewer opportunities' as commonly used in the European youth programmes.

> *"In fulfilling its objectives, the Programme should be more inclusive by improving participation among people with fewer opportunities. A range of measures could help to increase participation in the Programme of people with fewer opportunities, including better and more targeted outreach, communication, advice and assistance, simplified procedures, more flexible learning mobility formats, and increased engagement with small organisations, in particular newcomer organisations and community-based grassroots organisations that work directly with disadvantaged learners of all ages." (Regulation (EU), 2021/817)*

The European Solidarity Corps supports and finances young people to participate in projects that benefit communities at home or abroad. Young people can volunteer or organise solidarity projects and thus contribute to solidarity in Europe. The projects in which young people are involved contribute to social inclusion, but the programme itself also wants to give all young people the opportunity to participate.

> *"Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that solidarity activities are accessible to all young people, and in particular young people with fewer opportunities. Special measures should be put in place to promote social inclusion and, in particular, the participation of disadvantaged young people, including the provision of reasonable accommodation to enable people with disabilities to effectively participate in solidarity activities on an equal basis." (Regulation (EU), 2021/888)*

SALTO-YOUTH supports the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps with resources and training. SALTO-YOUTH consists of 7 resource centres, including one specifically focused on inclusion and diversity. In 2022 the SALTO network also extended to the formal education sector. The RAY Network (RAY stands for *Research-based Analysis of European Youth Programmes*) collects and analyses data about the participation in and the effects of the EU youth programmes. In doing so, they pay explicit attention to the scope and effects of these programmes in terms of social inclusion.

European Year of Youth

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2022, the European Union decided to put young people in the spotlights with the European Year of Youth. Here too, the EU reaffirms the importance of its youth population and social inclusion.

> *"[The President of the Commission] highlighted the confidence that she draws for Europe's future from the inspiration provided by Europe's young people, the President of the Commission added that 'if we are to shape our Union in their mould, young people must be able to shape Europe's future'. Europe needs the vision, engagement and participation of all young people to build a better future, and Europe needs to give young people opportunities for the future, a future that is greener, more digital and more inclusive."* (Decision (EU), 2021/2316)

> *"In her State of the Union address, the President of the Commission highlighted that 'Europe needs all its youth'. In fulfilling its objectives, the European Year should be fully inclusive and should actively promote the participation of young people of diverse backgrounds, young people with fewer opportunities and young people from the outermost regions."* (Decision (EU), 2021/2316)

2.2.2. Council of the European Union

In the policy initiatives of the Council of the European Union, we notice a close interdependence between the focus on social inclusion and the focus on youth. The EU also pays specific attention to the social inclusion of youth with targeted policy measures. The 2013 Council conclusions on the participation and social inclusion of young people with emphasis on those with a migrant background, for instance, draws attention to various instruments to promote social participation, such as education and training, participation and the recognition and support of youth organisations. These instruments are also reflected in subsequent Council acts and policy texts. We provide a thematic overview below.

a) Youth unemployment

Combating youth unemployment has been an important priority of the EU for several years, with initiatives from the Council and the Commission, such as the EU Youth Guarantee. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, these efforts were further intensified. The Council stresses the importance of combating youth unemployment by highlighting its negative impact:

> *"Youth unemployment and inactivity as well as limited access to inclusive high-quality education and training and social services can have a scarring effect, such as an increased risk of future unemployment, reduced levels of future earnings, loss of human capital and intergenerational transmission of poverty. Those elements translate into individual hardship and generate direct and indirect costs for society at large. They also add to regional inequalities, for example with young people unable to secure sustainable labour market integration in rural or remote areas and therefore seeking opportunities elsewhere." (EU Council Recommendation, 2020/C372/01)*

- Council conclusions on enhancing the social inclusion of young people not in employment, education or training (2014/C 30/03)]
- Council conclusions of 20 May 2014 on promoting youth entrepreneurship to foster social inclusion of young people (2014/C 183/04)]
- Council recommendation of 30 October 2020 on 'A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee' and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee (2020/C 372/01)

b) Education, training and lifelong learning

In an aforementioned recommendation about the Youth Guarantee, the Council refers to the scarring effect not only of youth unemployment and inactivity but also of the limited access to education and training on young people and on the relation between education and social inequality. (EU Council Recommendation, 2020/C372/01)

c) Participation

The Council encourages youth participation at European, local and regional level. Youth participation makes an essential contribution to society. Young people are seen as important actors for change and innovation.

> *"Promoting young people's participation in decision-making processes fosters inclusive and resilient societies, strengthens social, civic and territorial cohesion, and enhances links between European and local level policies." (EU Council Conclusions, 2021/C241/03)*
>
> Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes (2021/C 241/03)

> *"There is a need to recognise young people as key actors in building democracy, creating peaceful narratives, building social cohesion, and promoting European values. It is important to engage and recognise young people and stakeholders in the field of youth as key allies in building the resilience to combat such issues, to sustain peace and prevent violence, and to work towards an inclusive and peaceful society. In this context, youth work can play an important role in highlighting young people's potential to play a positive role in building a secure, cohesive and peaceful society." (EU Council Conclusions, 2018/C195/05)*
>
> Council conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe (2018/C 195/05)

Different Council acts point to the importance of civic space. For a definition, we refer to the work of the United Nations.

> *"Civic space is the environment that enables people and groups – or 'civic space actors' – to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life in their societies. Vibrant civic space requires an open, secure and safe environment that is free from all acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals, whether online or offline. Any restrictions on such a space must comply with international human rights law." (UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space, 2020).*

In recent Council Conclusions, the Council of the European Union stresses the importance of civic space and inclusive places for young people to shape youth participation.

> *"A healthy democracy relies on citizen engagement and an active civil society, not only at election time, but all the time. Engaged, informed and empowered young citizens and organisations advocating for their interests are the best guarantee for the resilience of our democracies, and for the common good." (EU Council Conclusions, 2021/C501I/04)*

The Council indicates:

> *"Young people need free, safe, open, accessible, inclusive and representative civic spaces that allow them to form associations, to engage in areas related to their needs and interests, regardless of the topic, to speak out on public issues and to participate in public decision making." (EU Council Conclusions, 2021/C501I/04)*

Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on safeguarding and creating civic spaces for young people that facilitate meaningful youth participation (2021/C 501 I/04)

The Council recognises that not all young people can participate equally in society and in decision-making processes and stresses the importance of participation for all young people. The Council also calls for increasing the accessibility to decision-making.

"Although significant progress has been made, young people still have fewer opportunities to participate, are underrepresented in decision-making processes and face multiple challenges that have been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The main challenges amplified amongst young people with fewer opportunities include a higher risk of unemployment, labour precariousness, poverty, exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination and inequality, insufficient investment in skills development, and impacts on their mental health. Young people's growing vulnerability is linked to unequal access to inclusive formal education and training, non-formal and informal learning and opportunities, over-representation in non-standard work and insufficient access to social protection, which have a structural effect on young people's lives, emancipation and transition to autonomy, in particular in terms of access to housing, fair living conditions, healthcare and decent jobs." (EU Council Conclusions, 2021/C241/03)
Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes 2021/C 241/03

"Enabling all young people to experience democracy requires an inclusive approach which takes account of their diversity in many respects. Special attention should be given to young people who have only limited access to participatory processes, youth work opportunities and interactions with other civil society actors as a result of individual or structural disadvantages, while bearing in mind the risk of intersectional discrimination." (EU Council Conclusions, 2020/C415/09)

Conclusions of the Council on fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe 2020/C 415/09

"Active and equal participation (supported through capacity building) of young people, especially those with fewer opportunities at all levels of civil and political life, is an essential condition for building peaceful, cohesive and equal societies. It is also important to eradicate poverty and social exclusion leading to marginalisation of young people." (EU Council Conclusions, 2018/C195/05)

Council conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe (2018/C 195/05)

"Improve the accessibility of different participation mechanisms such as youth councils, youth hearings and participatory conferences, including the EU Youth Dialogue, as well as digital tools for participation, ensuring that they focus on the concerns of different groups of young people in society, including unrepresented and underrepresented groups of young people to participate and take on leading roles in such mechanisms." (EU Council Conclusions, 2023/C185/06)

Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the social dimension of a sustainable Europe for youth (2023/C185/06)

The Council also highlights the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation for the participation of young people in democratic life.

> *"The digital transformation of our democracies brings with it the need to explore and promote innovative and alternative forms of participation such as digital democracy tools, whilst recognising the challenges of participation in the digital space and the limited access of some young people to the internet or digital technologies, or their lack of the skills and knowledge needed to use them. Therefore, there is a need to provide access and tailor-made solutions to support youth participation in democratic life through digital means and engage young people in an inclusive way." (EU Council Conclusions, 2021/C241/03)*

Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes 2021/C 241/03

> *"Improve the accessibility of different participation mechanisms such as youth councils, youth hearings and participatory conferences, including the EU Youth Dialogue, as well as digital tools for participation, ensuring that they focus on the concerns of different groups of young people in society, including unrepresented and underrepresented groups of young people to participate and take on leading roles in such mechanisms*." (*EU Council Conclusions, 2023/C185/06*)

Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the social dimension of a sustainable Europe for youth (2023/C185/06)

> *"Take into account the barriers to online participation faced by young people (inter alia, access to the internet, digital competences, lack of infrastructures and equipment) and strive to ensure safety of digital youth civic spaces." (EU Council Conclusions, 2021/C501I/04)*

Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on safeguarding and creating civic spaces for young people that facilitate meaningful youth participation (2021/C 501 I/04)

d) Digital transformation

Not only in terms of participation, but also in a broader sense, the increasing digital transformation of our society poses challenges in terms of the social inclusion of children and young people. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted clearly this digital divide. In a recent Council act, it recognises that:

> *"The digital divide poses a serious threat to well-being in digital education and training for both learners and educators, often reinforcing existing inequalities or creating new ones. School systems at national, regional and local level should be able to respond to any problems of insufficient access, inadequate equipment or unsatisfactory learning conditions faced by learners, in particular disadvantaged learners including those with disabilities and/or special educational needs and those facing challenges relating to the digital gender divide." (EU Council Conclusions, 2022/C469/04)*

Council conclusions on supporting well-being in digital education (2022/C 469/04)

The Council is also committed to:

> *"Building upon a human-rights based and human-centred digital transformation and to the principle of not leaving anyone behind, including by building digital public services that are inclusive of and accessible for persons with disabilities, older persons, and persons in situations of vulnerability, as well as promoting internationally such approach and alignment with EU standards." (EU Council Conclusions, 2023)*
>
> Council conclusions on digital empowerment to protect and enforce fundamental rights in the digital age

e) Sustainability

- The European Union resolutely opts for sustainability and assigns a special role to young people in this matter. Young people are seen as an important actor for change and innovation (see earlier).

> *"The European Union and its Member States are fully committed to the Paris Agreement adopted during the Paris United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) in December 2015. To achieve the purpose and the goals of the Paris Agreement, the European Union underlines the importance of all six elements of Action for Climate Empowerment, recognizes the critical role of young people as actors of change in climate action, and calls for further involvement of the youth in climate change policy, at international, European, national, regional and local level, and in unleashing the potential of Action for Climate Empowerment." (EU Council Conclusions, 2022/C 159/07)*

The EU recognises that a sustainable society must ensure a fair and inclusive transition for all (*EU Council Conclusions, 2022/C 159/07*). The Council therefore invites the Member States:

> *"To safeguard and create sustainable long-term, secure, accessible and inclusive civic spaces for cooperation with local, regional, national, European and international political decision-makers, where the voices of young people are heard, whatever their age, their concerns or their proposals for actions to protect the environment and tackle climate change, so that they are not only consulted but are also in a position to actively participate in decisions relating to these issues." (EU Council Conclusions, 2022/C 159/07)*
>
> Council conclusions on fostering engagement among young people as actors of change in order to protect the environment (2022/C 159/07).

The 2023 Council conclusions about this topic recognises that 'youth' is not a homogeneous group and that the consequences of climate change affect young people in unequal ways, and that the democratic possibilities of young people to express their opinion on this subject may also differ.

> *"The group that we define as 'youth' consists of a multitude of identities, with different abilities, needs, wills, resources and interests facing various challenges and opportunities and comes from various educational, cultural, geographic, economic and social backgrounds. These differences affect their interests, possibilities, and capacity to engage in actions for sustainable development and the environment."*

(EU Council Conclusions, 2023/C185/06)

"Democracy and human rights are indivisible in relation to sustainable development as climate change has a disproportionate impact on marginalised groups with fewer opportunities. People with the fewest resources have the most difficulty in adapting to climate related changes and those at risk of poverty are more likely to face a higher risk of exposure to pollution and environmental problems In addition, young people who are dependent on natural resources in different ways, in order to work, live or engage in their cultural traditions, may be negatively affected by climate change in ways that jeopardise their power to shape their own lives." (EU Council Conclusions, 2023/C185/06)

"Addressing the social dimension of sustainable development is a crucial aspect to empowering vulnerable groups in society. Issues of sustainable development are intersectional. Socioeconomic exclusion and democratic exclusion go hand in hand, affecting the extent to which young people are able to engage in actions for sustainable development. Achieving fair, sustainable and inclusive development through democratic processes needs to take all perspectives and opinions into account, via the principles of free speech and press freedom and through inclusive processes at all levels." (EU Council Conclusions, 2023/C185/06)
Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the social dimension of a sustainable Europe for youth (2023/C 185/06)

In the Council Conclusions on the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, the Council states:

"Investing in human rights, democracy and the rule of law is essential to achieve fairer, greener, more resilient and inclusive societies. The Council underlines that human rights, democracy and the rule of law, as well as a gender-responsive approach, will remain at the heart of the EU's response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU undertakes to ensure that our response upholds the dignity and human rights of all without discrimination of any kind. No one should be left behind, no human right ignored." (Council of the EU, 2020)

"Support the meaningful inclusion of young people, in particular young women and faith-based actors, and their full, effective and meaningful participation in all efforts to prevent atrocities and resolve conflict, build and sustain lasting peace." (Council of the EU, 2020)

2.2.2.2 European Commission

In addition to the efforts of the Member States, the European Commission also contributes to an inclusive society for young people. Via this link, you will find all information about the European Commission's policies in the field of social inclusion. The framework for the European Commission is the European Pillar of Social Rights, with twenty principles for a more fair, inclusive and prosperous Europe.

For young people, the European Commission is strongly committed to the theme of employment. With the Youth Guarantee, the EU takes action against youth unemployment. In addition, the Commission is also making efforts to make the labour market fairer and more inclusive with sufficient quality jobs for young people and good working conditions.

In 2013, the European Commission launched the recommendation to invest in children in order to break the negative spiral of disadvantage. In its recommendation, the Commission called on EU Member States to:

- improve children's access to adequate resources, for instance by supporting parents' participation in the labour market and providing an optimal combination of cash and in-kind benefits,
- give children access to affordable quality services, including inclusive early childhood education and care, and
- support the participation of all children in play, recreation, sports and cultural activities and put in place mechanisms that promote children's participation in decision-making that affects their lives.

Between 2013 and 2021, the European Platform for Investing in Children supported the implementation of this recommendation through research and concrete recommendations. Its implementation was also evaluated when drafting of the European Pillar of Social Rights. You can find more information about the recommendation, its follow-up and evaluation via this link.

In 2021, the Council of the European Union approved the European Child Guarantee, based upon a proposal of the European Commission. This programme should ensure that every child in the EU living in poverty and social exclusion has free and effective access to a range of basic services: free childcare, free education, healthy food, free healthcare and adequate housing. The Member States have committed to draw up national action plans for the period up to 2030. The Eurochild website provides an overview of all national action plans.

In addition, the European Commission developed a Plan for Children's Rights (the long version of the The EU Strategy on Children's Rights that was presented to the Council in 2021). You can find background information on the underlying (legal) texts and provisions of the action plan in this document. Some other EU action plans are also important for the social inclusion of children and young people, such as:

- Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 for people with a migration background
- A Union of equality : EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025
- Union of Equality: Strategy for the rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030
- Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform to combat Homelessness
- A European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+)
- EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life (2021 - 2030)
- LGBTIQ Equality Strategy (2020-2025)
- Gender equality strategy (2020-2025)
- EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation (2020-2030)
- Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU

As part of its Youth Action Plan in EU external action, the European Commission created the Youth Empowerment Fund together with the world's largest youth organisations to support young people in their contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals.

"The Youth Empowerment Fund, a new pilot initiative that will support grassroots youth organisations and youth-led initiatives. The overall objective of the Fund is to foster the contribution of young people to the SDGs in their communities. It will include two dedicated thematic components to promote youth actions on environment and climate change and the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised youth." (European Commission, 2022)Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council on the Youth Action Plan (YAP) in the EU external action 2022 – 2027: promoting meaningful youth participation and empowerment in EU external action for sustainable development, equality and peace

2.2.2.3 The European Parliament

The European Parliament has repeatedly adopted resolutions to strengthen EU measures that reduce poverty and improve the conditions and prospects of people with fewer opportunities (Makay, 2023). The Parliament advocates for adequate social services, minimum wages and an overarching European poverty strategy, including through the resolution on reducing inequality, with a special focus on in-work poverty. The Parliament took the initiative for the EU Child Guarantee that was adopted in 2021.

Furthermore, the Parliament adopted resolutions against discrimination on the basis of origin, gender and disability. In a resolution of 6 July 2022 on Intersectional Discrimination in the EU, the Parliament once again called on the Member States and the upcoming EU presidencies to adopt the anti-discrimination directive as soon as possible and urged the Commission to monitor the enforcement of existing EU anti-discrimination legislation (Makay, 2023).

The Parliament also drew attention to the situation of specific groups facing particular difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 17 April 2020, the Parliament adopted a resolution on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, in which it pointed out the situation of a number of vulnerable groups and called for a comprehensive strategy to combat poverty. In its resolution, the Parliament also called on Member States to ensure that community-based care and support services for persons with disabilities are funded, well-equipped and sufficiently staffed (Makay, 2023).

The Parliament's concerns about rising homelessness in the EU and the lack of affordable housing are also growing, as evidenced by the resolution of 24 November 2020 on tackling homelessness in the EU and the resolution of 21 January 2021 on access to decent and affordable housing for all (Makay, 2023).

The Parliament also requested a survey among young people from 16 to 30 years old, regarding their attitudes and behaviors in respect of politics, political engagement and the EU. Specifically, the survey covered the following topics:

- Young people's general level of interest in politics and the issues and values they feel should be prioritized

- The extent to which they participate in political and civic activities (including voting) and barriers to such participation
- Their understanding of, and attitudes towards, the European Union
- Their awareness of, and experiences of, the European Parliament's Youth Offer
- Their sources of information on political and social issues, and the perceived veracity of different sources.

We will discuss the results of this survey in the next chapter, specifically the values and priorities of young people for the EU.

3. What do young people themselves say about this topic?

We outline a number of surveys in which children and young people are asked about their expectations and priorities for Europe and the European Union: *The Europe Kids Want* (2019); *Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future* (2021) and the *European Parliament Youth Survey* (2021). We also briefly reflect on the results of the *EU Youth Dialogue*.

3.1 The Europe Kids Want

In 2019, Eurochild and UNICEF surveyed around 20,000 children and young people from 48 predominantly European countries through a questionnaire. The respondents were mainly between 10 and 17 years old: 5.1% were 9 years old or younger; 38.8% were 10 to 14 years old; 37% were 15 to 17 years old and 19.1% were 18 to 30 years old.

The respondents were most concerned about job opportunities, about violence and about climate change. When asked what would make their school a safer place, almost 60% of the respondents answered that it is important that no one would be treated badly because they are different. The vast majority of participants feel that adults do not take their opinion sufficiently into account. Two-thirds of the children and young people in the survey have a positive attitude towards people from other countries and 41% believe that the EU makes their lives better. Their three main recommendations for the EU: help keep peace in the world, protect our environment and ensure that everyone is treated equally.

3.2 Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future

In the run-up to the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Child Guarantee, the EU invited five children's rights organisations – UNICEF, Eurochild, Save the Children, World Vision and the Child Fund Alliance – to survey children within Europe and beyond. 10,000 children and young people between the ages of 10 and 17 (82% of whom were from the EU) completed the questionnaire. The study made extra efforts to reach out to children who are often overlooked in such research: children with disabilities, children with a migration or refugee background, Roma children, children in care facilities, LGBTQI+ children and children living in poverty.

In all countries, children and young people identify exclusion and discrimination as important issues. Most participants in the study did not feel personally discriminated against, although one in three indicated that they had experienced some sort of differential treatment. Especially as the respondents get older, they report more differential treatment, from 54% in the 11-year-olds to 83% in the 17-year-olds.

> *"The underlying reasons are complex but may derive from greater awareness and understanding of discrimination by children as they grow older, the development of identities during adolescence that can lead to differential treatment, or more negative perceptions of adolescents within society. It may also reflect that children from minority groups responding to the survey are generally older."*

Among respondents from minority groups, more than half report personal experiences of discrimination, systematically more than their peers. But even if children and young people do not experience discrimination themselves, they see and recognise discrimination in their environment. In the focus groups, respondents unanimously report that not all children are treated equally. The researchers note how sensitive this topic is among children and adolescents:

> *"The findings testify to a keen sensitivity among the respondents towards issues of discrimination, even if they themselves do not experience it. Children commented on how they have seen other children face differential treatment or bullying as a result of multiple factors including race or ethnicity, gender (identity), sexual orientation, disability, school grades, religion, appearance, socio-economic background, language or place of residence (including living in care). School emerges as the environment where children face most differential treatment, with bullying from both teachers and students being raised as pressing concerns."*

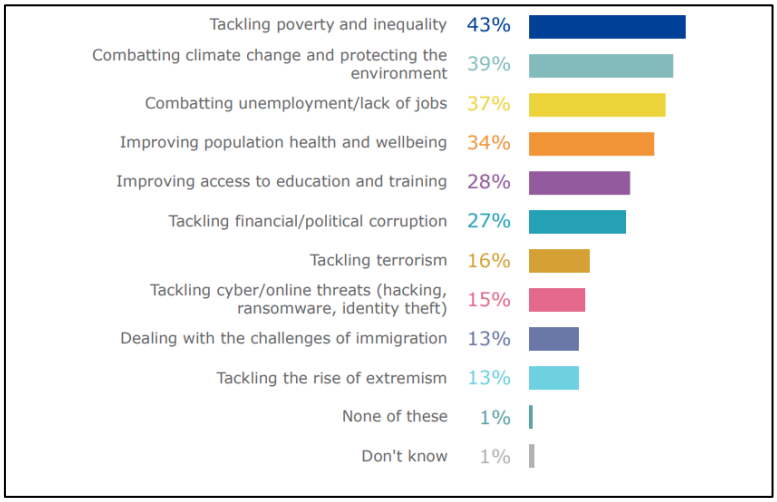
A recent study by Eurochild in four European countries on the views of children and young people about poverty confirms this finding. In focus group discussions, the participants describe what they understand by poverty and its impact on the lives of their peers: at school, at home and in the community. The respondents also formulate policy recommendations. This process strengthens the researchers' conviction that the participation of children and young people is important, also regarding sensitive and difficult subjects:

> *"These recommendations demonstrate that meaningful child participation is essential to policy discussions on all aspects that impact the children's lives. Their range and insight illustrate that children are experts in their own lives and that no one can understand their reality better than they can. Therefore, when their voices are missing from conversations on matters that affect them, the policy debate is effectively not fully informed and thus leads to decisions that often have no positive impact on the lives of children. The plans designed and the actions taken by decision-makers can only be fully informed if they are shaped in part by children's voices and recommendations. It is, secondly, a harmful misconception that by not having conversations with children on potentially sensitive issues – such as child poverty – we are shielding them from exposure to potential harm and the harsh realities of the world. Children are acutely aware of what is happening around them and how it affects them and their peers – as is evident in this report. By excluding them from such conversations, we deny their agency." (Eurochild, 2023)*

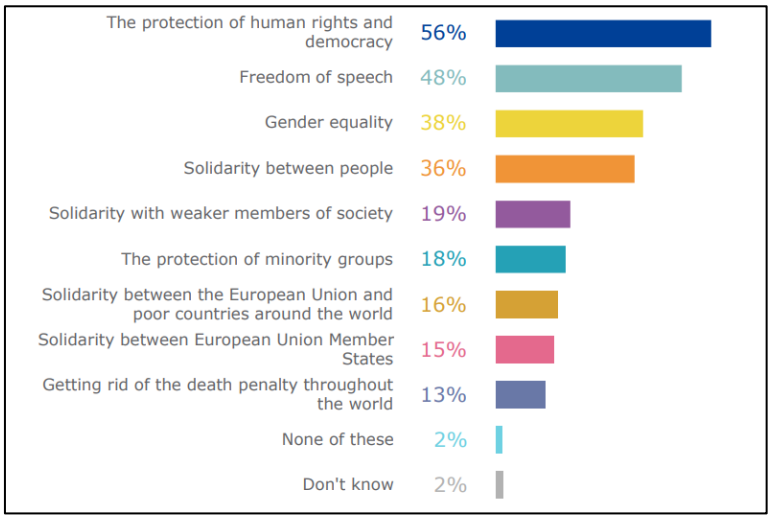
3.3 European Parliament Youth Survey

In 2021, on behalf of the European Parliament, Ipsos surveyed almost 75,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 31 in 27 European countries for the European Parliament Youth Survey.

> *"The political issues respondents would most like to see prioritised are tackling poverty and social inequality (43%); followed by fighting climate change and protecting the environment (39%); and fighting unemployment or a lack of jobs (37%). More than a third would also like priority to be given to improving the health and well-being of the population, and more than a quarter to improving access to education and training (28%) and tackling corruption (27%). Tackling cyber or online threats, dealing with the challenges of immigration, and tackling the rise of extremism emerge as less salient issues (cited by 15%, 13%, and 13%, respectively)."*



When it comes to the values of the EU, the biggest priority goes to the protection of human rights and democracy, pointed out by a majority of respondents (56%), followed by freedom of expression, which is chosen by almost half (48%). The next values are gender equality and solidarity between people, each chosen by more than a third of respondents (38% and 36% respectively).



3.4 EU Youth Dialogue

Through the *EU Youth Dialogue*, the EU discusses its youth policy with young people, youth organisations and experts. In an 18-month cycle, the young people focus on a theme defined by the youth ministers of the European Union. Young people are surveyed and the input from these surveys is processed and converted into recommendations during various youth conferences. 'Social inclusion' is regularly discussed as a main or sub-theme. A summary of these dialogue cycles can be found via this link.

1st cycle	1 January 2010 – 30 June 2011	“Youth Employment”
2nd cycle	1 July 2011 - 31 December 2012	"Youth participation in democratic life in Europe"
3rd cycle	1 January 2013 - 30 June 2014	"Social Inclusion"
4th cycle	1 July 2014 - 31 December 2015	"Youth autonomy"
5th cycle	1 January 2016 – 30 June 2017	"Enabling all young people to engage in a diverse, connected and inclusive Europe, ready for life, ready for society"
6th cycle	1 July 2017 – 30 December 2018	"Youth in Europe: What's next?"
7th cycle	1 January 2019 – 30 June 2020	"Creating opportunities for youth"
8th cycle	1 July 2020 - 31 December 2021	"Europe for YOUth – YOUth for Europe: Space for Democracy and Participation"
9th cycle	1 January 2022 - 30 June 2023	"A Sustainable and Green Europe"
10th cycle	1 July 2023 - 31 December 2024	“WE N**E**ED YO**U**TH”

In the various cycles, young people draw the EU's attention to the importance of youth participation in youth policy and plea to involve all young people in the EU Youth Dialogue cycle and more generally in European youth policy. This also implies a request for support to youth organisations so they can continue to take up a mediating role and for safeguarding physical and mental space for children and young people to meet and to empower them.

Youth researchers Dan Moxon and Ondrej Barta, who have followed the sixth and seventh cycles, relativise an overly strict view of the scope of the EU Youth Dialogue cycles.

> *“It is claimed that the EU Youth Dialogue processes do not engage with or represent the diversity of young people across Europe. However, the diversity monitoring undertaken during the consultation and among the EUYD participants clearly show that the consultation is very close to being reflective of the European youth population, albeit not perfectly so. Descriptions of methods from working groups also demonstrated there were very concerted efforts to engage with some of the most marginalised young people... It is also worth noting that conference participants are a more diverse group than representatives of some political bodies, such as Members of the European Parliament. Thus, while there are undoubtedly areas for improvement in the area of inclusion, the process is substantially more diverse than it is commonly perceived or understood to be. This being said, there is still space for a dedicated process to capture minority voices as distinct from the overall dominant themes and experiences of young people."*
> *(Moxon & Barta, 2020b)*

In their evaluation report of participant inclusion levels within the EU Youth Dialogue (Moxon & Barta, 2023), the authors confirm that “*at European level, the participation rate of ethnic minorities, religious minorities, young people who are disabled and LGBTI young people exceeds the level expected of participants than if they were selected randomly from the population.*”

In their report of the sixth EU Youth Dialogue cycle, the researchers give a top five of the priorities for European young people: (1) young women and girls do not face discrimination anymore; (2)

getting the skills I need for the future from my education; (3) being able to cope with stressful situations; (4) getting the knowledge I need for the future from my education; and (5) young people from marginalised communities are able to fully participate in society. (Moxon & Barta, 2018)

In the context of that sixth EU Youth Dialogue cycle, the researchers also wrote a sub-report with the participants' statements on the theme of 'inclusion'. They conclude that:

> *"Ending discrimination and promoting equality is widely accepted as a social goal for Europe. In general, young people within the consultation were supportive of this goal, so discussion focused on (...) how marginalised groups could be more effectively included within society. According to young people in the consultation, the creation of a more inclusive society requires a shift in attitude within society, so marginalised groups feel a sense of belonging and there is an overall greater tolerance, acceptance and reduced fear of difference. An integrated multicultural society, which still preserves the cultural heritage of various groups was desired. Greater integration was said to require more interaction between communities at a social level, (particularly migrants and non-migrants) and marginalised young people having a greater role within culture, sports and civil society. Young people desired equalisation of opportunities within the labour market, and stronger political representation of marginalised groups and migrants. Participants, also identified a need for greater social support for marginalised young people, so that all people have an acceptable standard of living. This means improving support overall, but also addressing specific needs, such accessible transport for young people with disabilities." (Moxon & Barta,2018)*

In their report on the seventh EU Youth Dialogue cycle, the researchers state that young people are uncertain and even cynical about access to quality jobs, especially among young people who already have experience in the labour market. Young people were also concerned about discrimination in the labour market.

> *"Discrimination and inequality in the workplace were seemingly both a common experience and a serious concern for young people who participated in the dialogue. Some commented that, combined with precarious temporary work positions, it significantly increased vulnerability of young employees who could have their work ended more easily. Within working groups' reports it was described as occurring in three interlinked ways. First of all, age discrimination directed towards young people. Here concerns were expressed that young people were routinely used as a cheaper workforce to undertake lower quality jobs. Frequently denied opportunities in favour of older workers and then trapped in a situation where they were unable to gain the experience required to move forward. Secondly, some working groups reported young people's concerns about nepotism and inequality. For them, access to job opportunities was too reliant on having networks and connections, meaning those without these networks, especially young people from minority backgrounds, were often excluded. More concerning, there was widespread concern and evidence of discrimination on the basis of protected characteristics such as disability, gender, ethnicity, as well as other factors such as chronic illness. Many working groups who had consulted specifically with marginalised groups, or analysed differences between survey responses identified this as an issue." (Moxon & Barta, 2020a)*

In the same report, the young people highlight key competences for youth workers to support social inclusion and non-discrimination:

"Another common theme was the need for youth workers to challenge discrimination rather than reproduce or permit it. This was said to require:

- *Knowledge and sensitivity of different backgrounds and cultures.*
- *Knowledge and understanding of the needs of young people from marginalised or excluded backgrounds.*
- *Open mindedness and tolerance to diversity opinions.*
- *The ability to promote cooperation between young people from different backgrounds and bring different cultures together.*
- *Knowledge of specialist services and the ability to connect young people to them (e.g. mental health support services)."*

This brings us to the next chapter on the role of youth work and youth workers to develop an inclusive society for young people.

4. What role does youth work play in the social inclusion of young people, in Flanders and in Europe?

The increasing attention for social inclusion at Flemish and European level from the 1990s onwards also increased the (renewed) policy attention for leisure and youth work participation. Inclusion in youth work is seen as a value in itself and an instrument for inclusion in other, more central areas of life such as education and employment (Van de Walle, et al., 2011). In this chapter, we discuss the role that Flemish and European youth policy ascribes to youth work for creating an inclusive society.

4.1 In Flanders

4.1.1 Youth work participation in Flanders

In their decree on youth and children's rights policy and the support of youth work (2023), the Flemish authorities define youth work as *"not-for-profit socio-cultural work for or by young people from 3 to 30 years old, in leisure time, with educational guidance and with the purpose to promote the general and integral development of the young people who participate in it on a voluntary basis.*" In 2021, there were 4.3 youth work initiatives per 1,000 young people under the age of 25 in the Flemish Region. These initiatives are fairly evenly spread over the territory and are in half of the cases organised by the local authorities. Just under half of the 2.6 million young people in Flanders participate, at least sporadically, in youth work activities.

Within this offer, a distinction is made between 'regular' or 'mainstream' youth work and the '(target-group) specific' youth social work (jeugdwelzijnswerk in Dutch). In principle, regular youth work focuses on all children and young people and is largely based on voluntary commitment. Examples are youth movements, open youth work, play initiatives and holiday organisations. The specific youth social work takes place in a certain place, such as a disadvantaged neighbourhood, or with a certain target group, such as children and young people with fewer opportunities, with a migration background or disabilities. Many volunteers are active in these initiatives, but it is mainly professionals who organise the youth work. These initiatives identify themselves as youth social work or as self-organisations of people with a migration background. Recently, the term 'broad youth work' was launched for the latter group.

Social exclusion mechanisms towards children and young people who cannot meet the unwritten and unspoken standards in society also manifest themselves in leisure time.

> *"Youth work is not a neutral territory. (...) youth work is not a versatile instrument for social inclusion, but part of social life and therefore inevitably a co-carrier of processes of exclusion (and inclusion) in society at large. This way, power inequalities from the dominant fields of social life tend to be reproduced within and by youth work." (Van de Walle et al., 2011)*

Various participation studies, such as the participation survey or the JOP monitor of the Jeugdonderzoekplatform (Youth Research Platform), clearly indicate an under-representation of these groups at the level of the youth work sector as a whole (De Visscher & Neyens, 2016). They

make less use of the youth work offer. The environmental analysis in the context of the Vlaams jeugd- en kinderrechtenbeleidsplan (Flemish youth and children's rights policy plan, by the Department of Culture, Youth and Media, 2019) provides an overview of the different groups and the thresholds they encounter.

Within the youth work sector, the specific offer has a relative over-representation of certain target groups: if they participate in youth work, this participation is more likely to take place in separate circuits. Recent research into the reach of Chirojeugd Vlaanderen (Tubex & Morreel, 2021) somewhat puts this picture into perspective.

> *"The cliché image that a youth movement is mainly for the white middle class requires more nuance. Of course, there are still barriers for children and young people to come to the Chiro youth movement. Especially members with a migration background are underrepresented. We do notice that there is a shift happening, especially with Chiro groups in an urban setting. In terms of poverty, family context, mental or physical disabilities and gender & sexuality, most Chiro groups do not score badly when looking at the members." (Tubex & Morale, 2021)*

Nevertheless, the general trend remains (Van der Eecken & Bradt, 2019). Participation in separate circuits is deeply rooted in the history of youth policy as research from the mid-2000s reveals.

4.1.2 The dual-track policy and the accessibility paradox

The selective reach of mainstream youth work is not a new phenomenon (Coussée, 2006). In order to broaden the reach, the traditional range of youth work from the 1960s and 1970s was diversified with less demanding and more non-committal forms of youth work. The aim was to bring children and young people into contact with youth work through low-threshold activities and then to allow them to move on to those forms of youth work that were more highly regarded. After all, the deep-rooted belief was that the positive effects of youth work are mainly gained in regular youth work and in the youth movements in particular (Coussée, 2009; Coppens et al., 2013). Precisely those young people who would benefit most from the impact of (regular) youth work - read: the youth movements - make least use of it (Coussée, 2009; Coppens et al., 2013). This clearly shows the hierarchy between the two offers: the specific offer should guide participants to the regular offer.

> *"In order to bring all young people into contact with the beneficial influence of youth work, new forms of youth work are created that are more accessible to hard-to-reach groups: open youth work, mobile youth work, outreach work and so on. These professionalised forms of youth work are often also described as youth social work. Participation in youth work is increased, but the discourse about leading participants to the regular offer does not materialise: separate circuits are emerging."* (Coussée, 2006)

> *"Although youth social work manages to reach the youth groups that are difficult to reach by the youth movements, it is questioned whether youth social work is 'real' youth work. The reason for this is that youth social work does not correspond to the ideals of what youth work should be – ideals that can all be found in the youth movements. For example, youth social work usually works with professional counsellors, it is also present outside of leisure time (homework support, employment*

advice, social counselling...) and is sometimes explicitly aimed at training young people." (Coppens et al., 2013)

We can frame this vision more broadly in a so-called functional view of social integration (Van de Walle & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012)

> *"In this vision, the goal is the coordination between the major social institutions and the individuals in our society. The problem here is that the dominant institutions in our society are not only suppliers of social resources. At the same time, they also determine the conditions under which these resources can be acquired: 'specific behaviours, identities, values, norms and so on are formalised whilst others are not' and 'some principles are entrenched in institutions while others are negated or marginalised' (O 'Brien & Penna, 2008, p. 87). It is not the tastes, behaviours, interests and attitudes of the lower layers of the population, but the 'habitus' (cf. Bourdieu, 1984) of the higher levels that determine these institutions."* (Van de Walle & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012)

In practice, the flow from specific to general youth work remains very limited. Specific youth work initiatives see their strongest members and therefore also their most important role models leave to the regular youth work, only to find that they drop out over time. When specific youth work makes its offer too similar to the norms and expectations of regular youth work, it becomes less attractive to its current participants. Although specific youth work does indeed reach the intended target groups, it still does not succeed in its goal as long as the transfer to regular youth work is not happening. In fact, for some specific youth work providers, their existence stops participants from moving on to the regular offer because they respond all too well to the needs and requirements of the children and young people they reach out to. This puts the specific youth work in an ambiguous and precarious position.

> *"[Specific youth work] is needed as long as 'real youth work' is not accessible to everyone, but in the meantime it is said to hinder the accessibility of general youth work. Youth social work has no identity of its own. It has an interim status and, at best, a derived identity: it has to fill the gaps left by general youth work. Youth social work is as vulnerable as its clients, a position that led to a crisis of the youth work profession (Banks 1996). It does not fit into the traditional youth work ideology (voluntary work, young people leading young people, activities restricted to leisure time...) and above all youth social workers need a budget to do their work. So, if they don't succeed in their mission of moving up the unattached youth, what's the point in organising youth social work? Solely to prevent young people from boredom as Furlong et al. (1997) put it? To put it mildly, this does not seem a very ambitious mission." (Coussée, 2009)*

Despite the difficult transfer into regular youth work, the belief in the positive and 'magical' effect of regular youth work remains unaffected. In the course of the 2000s, however, there is a growing understanding that regular youth work is struggling with organisational barriers that hinder access of specific target groups. Regular youth work is not inclusive by default, it has to make the necessary efforts to eliminate barriers. This leads to the so-called dual-track policy.

One track focuses on supporting regular youth work organisations in identifying and eliminating barriers. Every youth organisation should open up to all children and young people within its own possibilities. And to do so, it should eliminate any obstacles in terms of finances, physical access, information, counselling etc. This should effectively offer all children and young people

who want to participate in 'regular' youth work the opportunity to do so, regardless of their background. It is expected that these youth work initiatives will eventually develop into universal forms of youth work that appeal to all children and young people.

The other track focuses on supporting 'target-group specific' youth work organisations. The public authorities should guarantee a sufficiently large and diverse offer, so that every child or young person finds a suited form of youth work and an appropriate offer. This implies broadening the
existing offer with youth work that has different objectives, different methods and different target groups. The end goal is that this type of youth social work makes itself superfluous in the long run and allows its participants to move on to the regular youth work. The slogan is: inclusive where possible, specific if there is no other way.

Youth workers are supported and trained to remove barriers, resulting in modest successes, but without big breakthroughs. Filip Coussée calls this the accessibility paradox of youth work: the 'real' youth work is not accessible, the accessible youth work is not considered real youth work. The more we differentiate youth work, the more children and young people we reach, but not with the best formats of youth work. These remain out of reach and seem even less accessible, precisely because of the attractiveness of these less demanding but also less powerful forms of youth work.

> *"Youth work seems to chase its own tail, as policymakers, academic researchers and professional youth workers are lost in vicious circles." (Coussée et al., 2009)*

4.1.3 Appreciation of specific youth work breaks down hierarchical relationships

A paradox is an apparent contradiction that can be overcome by taking a different perspective. Filip Coussée and his colleagues were therefore looking for an alternative to the more abstract, offer-driven and ideological discussions about the accessibility of youth work. The researchers focused on the individuality of the target group with its specific needs and requirements and on the individuality of specific youth work with its precise answer to the needs. That way, the usefulness of the offer becomes apparent: what is in it for children and young people? The significance of youth work does not lie in the (almost self-evident) value of the offer itself, but in the value of that offer for the end user. In his own field research in Genk, Coussée notes that the specific youth social work is essentially no different from any other youth work: youth workers seek a balance between connecting to the lives of young people and broadening their lifeworld.

> *"In the words of the young people: in youth work you can feel at home and at the same time do things that you cannot do at home. Meeting friends and doing things you enjoy are examples of 'familiar' activities in youth work. Learning new things and, above all, getting to know new people, express the hunger for broadening their lifeworld." (Coussée, 2006)*

But since the lifeworlds of children and young people differ according to the conditions in which they grow up, the usefulness of youth work also differs according to that lifeworld. Not all forms of youth work function (in the same way) for all children and young people. Tineke Van de Walle addresses this topic in her PhD research:

"We saw in Sint-Amandsberg that youth work initiatives with their activities also broaden the lifeworld of the young people, 'tailor-made' and in a variety of ways. The youth social work initiatives surveyed in the study flirted with the boundaries of our youth work definitions: the youth social workers also organised counselling, community work and the like, in response to the needs they identified in their participant groups. While young people in youth movements 'get dirty', youth social workers take their youngest participants to places outside their own, familiar neighbourhood. The older (Turkish) girls of the youth club talked about the opportunity they were given via the youth club to travel to Turkey alone with friends. The president and professional youth worker of the same youth club (both in their thirties) spoke about the information and counselling they gave to their participants about studying and career choices." (Van de Walle & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012)

The differentiation of the offer is necessary to carry out useful youth work. Imposing one type of youth work on all children and young people makes little sense if you want to give all children and young people the opportunity to find an answer to their needs in youth work. (Van de Walle & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012).

"It is clear that there is no one standard offer that can be liberating for all children and young people. Youth work can therefore only be a permanent quest to connect with the lifeworld of children and young people." (Coussée & Roets, 2011)

This is in line with Article 31 of the International Declaration of the Rights of the Child on the right to appropriate leisure:

"States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity."

In the meantime, various studies have mapped out the needs and requirements of specific target groups and the responses of youth work to them. For example, key factors of youth social work were mapped (Deduytsche & Crivit, 2010; De Pauw, et al., 2013; Coppens et al., 2013; Sonneveld et al., 2020; Sonneveld et al., 2022). Several studies also pointed out the importance of meaningful relationships for children and young people with fewer opportunities (Desmet & Villanueva O'Driscoll, 2019; Hannes & Uten, 2018). The appreciation for the bridges that youth social work builds to other areas of life also grew.

"Excluding adults (from youth work), imprisoning young people within their own socio-cultural group, closing off youth work from education and family... these are all elements that help ensure that emancipation is limited to individual development within the existing social relationships. With what we have come to call the 'third socialisation environment' and the advancement of the youth movements as the ideal youth work model - many elements have been removed from youth work. It could be precisely those elements that offered the most emancipatory tools for those 'who need it most'." (Coussée, 2006)

Regular youth work was able to liberate middle-class young people by distancing itself from welfare issues and by withdrawing to their own youth work island. But for children and young people with fewer opportunities, it is emancipatory to address exclusion mechanisms in other areas of life in their leisure-time activities.

> *"Youth work practice which only speaks to its own and which concentrates its attention on leisure provision, also reduces its ability to influence the bigger social picture. It seems that youth work's 'isolation' in Flanders has brought and still brings empowering space for middle class young people, i.e. young people who are fairly well integrated in society and may need some room to spread their wings and broaden their horizons. Unintentionally, this splendid isolation, however, makes youth work even more useless for vulnerable young people. As youth workers get silenced in the broad social debate on youth, education and society (and indeed contribute to their own marginalisation), they do not have many possibilities to offer empowering leverages to those young people that need them the most."* (Coussée et al., 2009)

This also makes the politicising nature of youth social work apparent. Youth social work points out that youth work does more than only supporting children and young people to find their way in society. Besides being a transitional area between their 'lifeworld' and the 'system', youth work is also a forum in which children and young people can critically distance themselves from society. Especially young people who are negatively impacted by society and encounter negative experiences, injustice and inequality need contexts that support them to analyse their situation and take common action for social change.

Gradually, we are gaining more scientific insights into the needs of children and young people and the answers youth work can offer. This also captures the leisure-time experiences of other target groups such as children and young people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ youth, young migrants, children in residential care and children and young people living in an asylum centre. There is also research into the characteristics of self-organisations for children and young people with a migrant background and the methods they develop, such as meeting points that allow young people to discuss the different and sometimes conflicting sub-aspects of their identity. There was also more research into the value and impact of youth work.

In a 2016 vision paper on diversity in/and youth work, the youth work sector put different forms of youth work on equal footing.

> *"The growing and evidence-based self-awareness of the 'target-group specific' offer indicates that the sector is finding it increasingly difficult to separate both types of youth work and to consider one as a stepping stone, intermediary stage or safety net to/for the other. On the contrary, the sector is pushing for the equivalence of all forms of youth work." (De Visscher & Neyens, 2016)*

Increasing scientific knowledge on this topic makes it clear that diverse children and young people have different interests and needs regarding their leisure time: not only according to 'what' is offered, but also 'who' is offering it, 'in what context' it takes place etc. (Van de Walle, 2012; Van der Eecken & Bradt, 2019). If you want all children and young people to find a useful offer for their leisure time and can choose it freely, this leads to very diverse leisure participation. This inevitably entails that various youth groups will prefer different types of leisure activities and youth work, and that they will not spend their leisure time together. But what does this

mean for the encounter and interaction of children and young people growing up in different lifeworlds?

4.1.4 What about the encounter between different lifeworlds?

For practice, policy and youth work research alike, encounters between children and young people growing up in different life circumstances remain a meaningful youth policy objective. It is worthwhile to counter participation in segregated circuits so that youth work participation can create encounters and connections between diverse children and young people, resulting in a future generation that can deal with diversity and show solidarity beyond its own group (Van de Walle, 2012). Children and young people need mirrors and windows (Ang, 2016).

- By meeting each other and doing activities together, children, young people, youth workers and organisations expand their views of the world and reflect on their own frame of reference. Mutual respect, understanding and solidarity cannot exist without empathy and nuance. And these arise and develop through encounters in which everyone can participate with their individuality and strengths, in which people look for connections and shared interests and where the encounter itself - paradoxically - doesn't get too much attention. And in that 'conviviality' or peaceful coexistence, people can then bring up issues and make claims (Oosterlynck e.a., 2016).

One type of leisure activities does not exclude the other. Children and young people can enjoy both a leisure offer that pays explicit attention to a particular aspect of their identity and one in which that aspect fades into the background (De Visscher, et al., 2019).

> *"Some children and young people spend much of their leisure time on the streets, so they do not (immediately) feel at ease in very structured and regulated forms of leisure activities. Others do find connectedness in a 'mainstream' sports club or in youth work. If their social position is taken into account in a discrete way, they enjoy developing their talents and relegating poverty to the background. But equally, these young people (especially from puberty onwards) look for places where poverty is an issue and where they are allowed to be themselves. In those places, they find connectedness with peers and youth workers who know what they are going through, who support and empower them. (De Visscher, et al., 2019)*

Research and practice suggest that bridging differences is not impossible, but it does require a specific approach and effort: in terms of interaction with and between participants, how the youth work is organised and how the activities look to the outside world (Smets, et al., 2021).

> *"Youth associations that choose and succeed in bringing participants together across societal divides certainly deliver a specific added value within a diverse youth work field. But rather than considering an 'accessible youth movement' as a delivered success, the reality in these organisations requires continuous administrative, material and educational support so that the promise of tolerance and solidarity does not have a negative impact." (Van de Walle & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012)*

Without mediation and guidance, different groups mix less with each other and spontaneously seek the comfort of a homogeneous group (Van Haaften, A.F., 2022). Or as this practitioner explains:

"A youth worker in a city actually does not have a hard time finding 'a' target group. There are a lot of children and young people with nothing on their hands. But attracting a heterogeneous group, that's another story, that takes blood, sweat and tears. You don't only need to actively recruit new people, but it also requires effort to convince the young people who are already participating to try out activities that confront them with something new. And it also requires effort, once the new people join in, to manage the conflicts this can create. It requires patience, flexibility, perseverance, tolerance for chaos as well as a strong conviction. At times, you have to actively defer judgement and stick to an unwavering belief that living together is more important than segregation, and that there is something to learn from everyone." (Van Craeynest, B., 2014)

Setting up and coaching meaningful encounters across differences requires specific know-how and a particular approach by the youth workers, but it also requires sufficient leeway for the youth workers to freely explore shared themes.

"It is crucial for marginalised and non-marginalised people to come into contact with alternative discourses and new people to be able to produce new knowledge(s) and more alternative and free ways of living (Pease, 2002). So, it is of vital importance to go beyond the 'separate circuits', but not by strategies that inevitably lead to the marginalisation or civilisation of vulnerable youth... Cross-connections that search for new communalities between young people on a thematic base, e.g. in the sphere of sports, formal education, arts, and social action may broaden perspectives without losing the 'safe youth work base'. However, 'crossing the boundaries' is not just a matter of good methods and good programmes. Youth workers offer a safe haven by means of meaningful activities and relationships to challenge young people's ways of thinking without being moralistic or disapproving (Giesecke, 1984; Coussée, 2006). This open social-pedagogical and political process of socialisation should be at the core of youth work. Policy makers and researchers should open up the space within which youth workers can develop (alternative) understandings of young people and their shared dilemmas, and shift the attention of youth work policy from individual, clear-cut outcomes of youth work to assuring social rights and collective provisions for young people through youth work." (Coussée et al., 2009)

In addition, there is a growing understanding that encounters can also be organised between youth organisations, youth workers and between children and young people who spend their free time separately from each other (De Visscher & Neyens, 2016).

"Perhaps regular encounters of youth workers across different youth work formats is more constructive than striving for a social mix within activities. This can pave the way for unbiased encounters between participants of different organisations. Other alternatives, such as supporting larger common youth initiatives, also emerged from the youth work study. In general, when youth work initiatives transcend their everyday activities, this creates opportunities to contribute to solidarity."
(Van de Walle & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012)

Shared involvement in a neighbourhood or the shared use of a venue can also be a trigger solidarity starting from those shared places.

"Whether it's the workplace, the playground, the sports field or the street: spaces bring people from all kinds of backgrounds physically closer together. Precisely because space often is the only thing we

still share, we believe it provides a good basis for solidarity in a superdiverse society. New forms of solidarity in diversity arise from taking a shared responsibility for the places where we work, learn, live or relax – whether or not willingly and whether or not forced. After all, such small-scale intersections of diversity offer the opportunity to experience in a very informal way how to best deal with different points of view. They are also places where citizens learn to take up responsibility in very tangible practices. Despite their differences, this can also encourage them to join forces for very concrete issues." (Oosterlynck & Schuermans, 2013)

In a number of youth work initiatives such as WereldSpelers (Global Players), OOG voor armoede (EYE for Poverty), Jeugdwerk tegen racisme (Youth work against racism) and projects on cooperation between youth work and youth care Maak tijd vrij (Free up time) and Maak Samen Tijd Vrij (Free Up Time Together), we notice increasing attention to the lifeworld perspective and the usefulness of the offer. Youth organisations are also looking more at how they can promote social inclusion from an alliance and cooperation perspective, rather than just referring young people to the existing offer. At the same time, there is also more attention for the dynamics between organisations in the field of youth work, culture and sport. Demos explores the (power) relationships between organisations in the leisure landscape under the headings of 'claiming space' and 'making space'. This is part of a broader vision of participation in and through leisure activities.

4.1.5 From vision to policy

In 2018, the above vision led to the development of the masterplan diversiteit in het jeugdwerk (Master plan diversity in youth work, 2018-2020). The plan bundled a wide range of actions to achieve more and more equal opportunities for diverse groups of children and young people and to create more interactions between children and young people who grow up in different living conditions. In the final report of the master plan, you find an overview of the achievements. Various goals and actions from the master plan were also integrated into the jeugd- en kinderrechtenbeleidsplan 2020-2024 (youth and children's rights policy plan) that prioritises leisure activities for all children and young people.

4.1.6 Building bridges

In recent years, the number of projects that use bridge persons or bridge builders to bring children and young people into contact with youth work and organised leisure activities has increased, and also projects that facilitate encounters and interaction between the diverse participants. We provide a brief overview of these projects and their main learning outcomes. Six calls for projects were launched between 2009 and 2023. The focus was mainly on building bridges between children and young people in poverty and youth work. Recently, attention also went to young newcomers. These projects were always accompanied by a supportive assignment/research and the results were translated into reports and brochures:

- Uit De Marge and Netwerk tegen armoede (Network against poverty) wrote this publication from their supportive role for youth work from the perspective of poverty associations.

- Demos and Vlaamse Vereniging van Jeugddiensten (Flemish Association of Youth Services, now Bataljong) supported four local authorities (Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels and Maasmechelen) to stimulate children and young people with fewer opportunities to participate in youth work. The results of this supportive assignment found their way into this publication.

- Between 2016 and 2019, the Flemish authorities gave 19 projects the opportunity to build bridges between sports and youth work and families in poverty. Demos and the Vlaams Instituut voor Sportbeheer en Recreatiebeleid (Flemish Institute for Sports Management and Recreation Policy) were commissioned to support these projects and to capture their learning experiences. This publication concluded their supportive assignment.

- Between 2017 and 2018, the Flemish authorities funded 12 bridge builder projects to explore the potential of the concept of 'bridge building' to increase diversity in youth work. Researchers from AP Hogeschool (AP University College) supervised this process and wrote this publication about it.

- Between 2018 and 2020, 16 projects received funding from the Flemish authorities to delve into the theme of 'youth work and social integration'. These projects also worked with bridge persons who bring diverse children and young people into contact with youth work and facilitate encounters with the existing participants. The findings from the action research about these projects can be consulted via this link.

- From March 2021 to February 2023, the Flemish authorities funded 19 projects focussing on liaison ambassadors for youth work. The call for projects was a joint initiative of the Flemish Ministers for Living Together and for Youth. The Flemish authorities entrusted a support and research assignment to the Research Centre for Pedagogy in Practice of the Karel de Grote Hogeschool (University College). The report of this assignment can be found here.

Bridge persons respond to gaps between supply and demand. They are the missing link between services and providers on the one hand and potential end users on the other. To this end, they use various strategies: bottom-up approaches, connections within and from an accessible youth work offer, individual guidance, support for associations, networking and structural cooperation. Proactive and frequent contacts are a central element of these strategies: reaching out to people is the core of their success. Bridge persons combine different strategies, but it is impossible for one person to offer the entire palette, both practically and in terms of profile. Organisations and boards that employ a bridge person need to make informed choices about the bridge person's strategy and profile.

Bridge persons draw our attention to the crucial importance of a trust relationship when working towards accessibility. Accessibility is more than just a matter of marketing and organisational measures, it requires human contact and trust. It is also important that the type of contact is not too narrowly and functionally defined in terms of leisure activities. It is about a broad interest in and commitment to people, both on the demand and supply side, and to the role that leisure time has in their lives.

Bridge persons can remove obstacles to organised leisure activities, but they cannot remove all barriers. Together with the end users, for instance, they are faced with the limited availability and accessibility of the youth work offer. They cannot always influence the reliability or usability of the youth work offer. From research into twelve bridge building projects in youth work, we learn that especially organisations with a strong vision and core identity, an open and reflective culture and a negotiable structure have a solid basis for building bridges (Van Ceulebroeck & De Ceuster, 2019). Organisations that offer leisure activities often don't have enough time and hands. Their capacity is limited, also to receive support. Their minds and agendas are full. This complicates the work of bridge persons.

Bridge persons cannot do their job without a network and partners to cooperate with. At the same time, they empower and drive partnerships and networks. Building networks, making contacts, building trust, outreach work... are processes that require time and effort and sufficient leeway to carry out the job according to their own insights and personality. Bridge persons require a long-term commitment and perspective.

4.2 In Europe

Until the beginning of the 21st century, there was little policy attention for youth work at the European level. A 7-part series on the history of youth work in Europe draws attention to the development of youth work in Europe and how that development continues today. Research increasingly focuses on the impact of extracurricular activities in general and youth work in particular. The increasing attention to and awareness of youth work at European level lead to the European Youth Work Conventions in 2010, 2015 and 2020. Youth work in Europe has a wide variety of historical roots, philosophy, practice, resources and professionalism. At the same time, youth work in Europe also has significant commonalities: it creates space for the voice and autonomy of young people and builds bridges so that young people can take the next steps in their lives with skill and confidence. In the last decade, political support for youth work has been increasing in both the European Union and the Council of Europe. The Council resolution on a European Youth Work Agenda confirms this political commitment.

In its European recognition and support, youth work is given a strong role in the field of social inclusion and social cohesion. We list quotes from various Council acts below. We found a number of general statements on the topic and more specific attention to concrete challenges such as the prevention of radicalisation, the inclusion of young newcomers, , intergenerational dialogue and the digital inclusion of young people.

4.2.1 General statements on the role of youth work in social inclusion and social cohesion

> *"Social inclusion requires a comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach to address the multi-faceted nature of marginalisation and exclusion in society. Youth work plays an important role in preventing social exclusion and enhancing social inclusion. Youth work offers developmental spaces and opportunities for all young people and 'is based on non-formal and informal learning processes and on voluntary participation'. Effective youth work and youth initiatives seek to empower young people*

and encourage their active participation in society. It equips them with skills, competences and experiences for life, thereby maximising the protective factors which enhance the development, well-being, autonomy and social inclusion of all young people, including those with fewer opportunities." (EU Council Conclusions, 2013/C168/03)

Council conclusions on the contribution of quality youth work to the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people [2013/C 168/03]

"Youth work plays an important role in the personal and social development of young people, their participation in society and in the transitions, they are going through. It is aimed at all young people, including those less engaged with society and/or with fewer opportunities and/or whose full political and social participation is at risk due to individual or structural disadvantages or discrimination." (EU Council Resolution, 2020/C415/01)

"Youth work enables young people to learn about and experience universal values such as human rights, gender equality, democracy, peace, pluralism, diversity, inclusion, solidarity, tolerance and justice. An essential component of youth work is creating safe, accessible, open and autonomous spaces in society, as well as supportive and experiential learning environments for young people. Youth work must remain responsive to changes in society and in young people's everyday lives, to new knowledge and to the political context, while also being actively inclusive and offering equal opportunities to all young people." (EU Council Resolution, 2020/C415/01)

Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda (2020 C 415/01)

4.2.2 The role of Youth Work in tackling specific challenges

"Youth work uses a broad and holistic approach, involves young people actively and works together with individuals and groups of young people to find solutions to their questions and problems. In this way, youth work offers a safe environment to grow, build an identity, feel a sense of belonging and be exposed to positive peer influences, and could prevent negative peer pressure leading to violent radicalisation." (EU Council Conclusions, 2016/C213/01)

The role of the youth sector in an integrated and cross-sectoral approach to preventing and combating violent radicalisation of young people (2016/C 213/01)

"Youth work has, among other things, the potential to help engage young people with diverse backgrounds and living conditions, including those with fewer opportunities, in different types of intergenerational projects and activities and can serve as a valuable instrument for promoting intergenerational dialogue, intergenerational solidarity and intergenerational equity as well as for building positive relationships between people of different generations." (EU Council Conclusions, 2022/C 495/03)

Conclusions of the Council and the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on promoting the intergenerational dimension in the youth field to foster dialogue and social cohesion (2022/C 495/03)

"Youth work is quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making." (EU Council Conclusions, 2018/C441/03)

"Among the guiding principles of youth work are the importance of promoting European values, gender equality and combating all forms of discrimination, respecting the rights and observing the principles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, taking into account possible differences in the living conditions, needs, aspirations, interest and attitudes of young people due to various factors and recognising all young people as a resource to society. The ability of youth work to be responsive to individuals is of particular value in recognizing the abilities and strengths of young people with fewer opportunities." (EU Council Conclusions, 2018/C441/03)

"The aim of youth work is to achieve positive destinations in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Young people, including young refugees and other third country nationals, are individuals experiencing this transition period. Youth work aims to include all young people into society, while also offering tools and opportunities to enable them to influence society as active citizens. This inclusive nature of youth work should be applied to support the inclusion of young refugees and third country nationals into the new hosting society, while respectfully being aware that their inclusion process starts from a different point than that of local young people." (EU Council Conclusions, 2018/C441/03)

Conclusions on the role of youth work in the context of migration and refugee matters (2018/C 441/03)

"Youth work has a great potential to allow for experiential learning in a non-formal setting and to involve young people in activities to strengthen their digital competences and media literacy. Youth work can also engage young people who are at risk of being left behind in a digitalised society." (EU Council Conclusions, 2019/C 414/02)

Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Digital Youth Work (2019/C 414/02)

4.2.3 Other initiatives

The EU also developed an Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for its own youth programmes, namely Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. And through the SALTO Inclusion & Diversity resource centre, the EU provides support and training to implement this strategy.

The Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe also feeds the inclusion of young people with various research reports and publications, both on youth policy and on the role of youth work. A selection of the relevant publications in the field of social inclusion of children and young people with fewer opportunities:

- EU-CoE youth partnership policy sheet on Social Inclusion
- Social inclusion for young people: breaking down the barriers (2007)
- The politics of diversity in Europe (2008)
- Some still more equal than others? Or equal opportunities for all? (2011)
- Finding a place in modern Europe (2015)
- Thinking seriously about youth work. And how to prepare people to do it (2017)

- Youth work against violent radicalisation (2018)
- Between insecurity and hope. Reflections on youth work with young refugees (2018)
- STEP-by-STEP together. Support, Tips, Examples and Possibilities for youth work with young refugees (2018)
- Social inclusion, digitalisation and young people (2020)
- Insights into social inclusion and digitalisation (2020)
- Young people, social inclusion and digitalisation. Emerging knowledge for practice and policy (2021)
- The role of youth work in supporting young refugees and their political participation: education, social capital and agency (2021)
- Review of the documents on young people's access to rights and non-discrimination: A Desk Research Study (2021)
- Evaluation of participant inclusion levels within the EU Youth Dialogue (2023)
- Meaningful youth political participation in Europe: concepts, patterns and policy implications
- Shrinking democratic civic space for youth
- Young people's right to assemble peacefully. A mapping study, in preparation of the first review of the recommendation CM/Rec (2016)7

In a European study on youth work (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021a) youth workers indicate that their contribution to social inclusion can be more valued. This appreciation should translate into better funding, but also into involving youth workers in decision-making.

> *"Youth workers also felt that recognising the role of youth work for social inclusion should translate into improved and increased funding opportunities at national and EU level for youth workers who cater to the most vulnerable groups, and who also tend to be more financially vulnerable. Participants also highlighted that youth workers and young people should be better involved in the policy discussions on issues around* social inclusion to provide youth associations the opportunity to present their work and ideas (EU)." *(European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021a)*

In the study, youth workers indicate that they need support to organise low-threshold activities, to compose diverse teams, to exchange experience with other youth workers, to be more outreach-oriented and to enter into cooperation with other actors (within education and care, for example). Youth workers indicate that social inclusion can be given a higher priority. Youth work organisations can also structurally further inclusion by focusing on more diversity in youth worker teams and the physical accessibility of youth infrastructure.

> *"Participants in the focus group (…) explained that youth work managers had an important role to play in implementing inclusive practices in their organisation, for example recruiting diverse staff for inclusion: 'a homogeneous team only speaks to one particular group, whereas different personalities / backgrounds / nationalities / genders work as role models for the young people.' For example, a participant to this focus group mentioned that having a youth worker with a refugee background had led to an influx of children with a migration background, who before this time had never joined activities. Youth work managers could also ensure that the physical environment for youth work is inclusive." (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021a)*

5. What can we learn from the research on social inclusion?

5.1 Social exclusion is a tough and complex problem

5.1.1 Hard figures

At both Flemish and European level, the social exclusion of children and young people appears to be a persistent problem. Despite the support for social inclusion in society, increased prosperity and various policies and campaigns, we are making too little change and failing to tackle poverty, social exclusion and discrimination in a decisive way. The figures on social exclusion remind us of this time and time again. Although the intersectional perspective is increasing, we notice that the existing figures still zoom in on a specific characteristic, such as poverty, disability or migration background. The influence of other reasons for discrimination such as place of residence, education, gender identity or sexual orientation are less captured by the figures. With this limitation in mind, we outline some general observations and analyses at the Flemish and European level.

In terms of **poverty,** for example, increasing prosperity is not enough to reduce poverty. On the contrary, poverty is increasing and the gap between rich and poor is widening.
Various researchers such as Bea Cantillon (2021, 2023) and Matthias Somers (2019a, 2019b) point out system errors in the development of the welfare state.

> *"The welfare state is failing to reduce poverty among the working-age population, in Belgium, but also in other rich countries. On the contrary, among people with low education, in families with poor employment, and also among workers, income poverty has been on a slow but steady rise for many years and in many countries. There are major differences between countries in the level, speed and periodicity of rising trends. But everywhere, even in the most high-performing countries, for years now, it has not been possible to sustainably bend the upward curves." (Cantillon, 2023)*

> *"The proportion of people living in poverty has risen from less than 10 percent of the population in the mid-1980s to more than 15 percent now. At the same time, the number of people who can count themselves among the upper middle class or even the rich class has grown. Society is polarising: more people are poor and more people are rich. And the core middle class, which once included more than four out of ten Belgians, is slowly but surely shrinking... It is an important and depressing finding: not only are more and more people living in poverty, the gap between those who have to make ends meet with an income below the poverty line and those who enjoy a middle-class income is widening. The difference in opportunities and life experience is growing." (Somers, 2019b)*

We have not yet been able to reduce child poverty either. On the contrary, since the turn of the century, the proportion of children with fewer opportunities has even doubled (Somers, 2019). A recent study points to the persistent material deprivation among children and European research also shows how poverty violates the fundamental rights of children.

At the European level, there was a small decrease in the risk of poverty among children and young people between 2015 and 2019, but the COVID-19 crisis brought the poverty level back to that of previous years. In terms of mobility, education, employment and mental health, the

COVID-19 crisis also left traces on the entire youth population, but in particular on children and young people with fewer opportunities. This is described by the European Commission in its report on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy and the annexes to this report, such as the Commission staff working document and the sub-report on social inclusion.

The social participation of **people with disabilities** also remains a major challenge for policymakers. From the most recent statistics, we can only find data on the participation of persons with disabilities from the age of 18.

> *"In general, it can be said that the social position and participation of persons with disabilities is clearly less good than that of persons without disabilities. Persons with disabilities are generally less highly educated, participate less in the labour market, are more often confronted with a lower income and a higher risk of poverty, live more often in less stable housing of poorer quality, experience health problems much more often and participate less in associative life, culture, sports and politics. In almost all areas, it also appears that people with disabilities who experience severe disabilities in their daily activities score even worse than people with less severe disabilities." (Van Weddingen, Noppe & Moons, 2022).*

As far as children and young people with disabilities under the age of 18 are concerned, we mainly found research data on their leisure participation, both from the perspective of the children and the parents. A recent study into the play opportunities of children and young people with disabilities within the holiday offer in Ghent concludes:

> *"Many organisations still see inclusion as the icing on the cake. All basic conditions and structures should be in place (= the cake) and then work can be done on inclusion (= the icing). Organisations are stuck in a kind of vicious circle. They reach children and young people with a slight need for support but find that they lack the knowledge and expertise to really work on an inclusion policy. They invest too little time and resources to get to grips with it in a structural way. That way, they have to disappoint children and young people who cannot take part in youth work. And the circle continues to turn. In addition, the metaphor of the icing on the cake suggests that inclusion is an option. The anti-discrimination law states that no exclusions should take place on the basis of 'disability, faith or beliefs, sexual orientation, age, wealth, marital status, political opinion, trade-union activity, health conditions, physical or genetic traits, birth, social origin and language.' (UNIA, 2022) Although disability is mentioned, practice teaches us that the anti-discrimination law is applied differently within leisure policy. Whereas exclusion because of origin, faith, sexual orientation is considered 'not done', there is more tolerance for exclusion because of disability. This is more described as 'failed inclusion' rather than a mockery of the anti-discrimination legislation. Inclusion of people with a disability thus slowly slips into becoming optional, into being the icing on the cake." (Waes, Fonteyne & Haezebrouck, 2022)*

Racism and discrimination based on **ethnic-cultural background** are also persistent. In a recent study by the Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel (Flemish Umbrella Organisation for School Pupils), almost 1 in 2 pupils (47% of the 11,072 pupils surveyed) says that they have witnessed racism at school. Almost 1 in 5 pupils (18%) has already experienced racism in secondary school (Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel, 2023).

In a recent European survey, 45% of Europeans of African descent report experiences of racial discrimination in the past 5 years. This is an increase compared to the previous survey (39%). (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023)

5.1.2 Role of policy

These evolutions partly escape the influence of policymakers. A war, a health crisis or an economic crisis face governments with a reality they have to relate to. In addition, policymakers are also confronted with deep-rooted views and beliefs held by services, organisations and the general population, for example that people with a disability are best off in special services tailored to their needs. Some well-intentioned measures lead to insufficient or even counterproductive effects.

In addition, there are several sources of criticism on the approach to social inclusion. Policy is often insufficiently specific, inadequate and lacking depth. Policymakers still focus too much on the mainstream and fail to develop sufficiently generous, decisive and focused policies together with the intended target group. For example, the focus on employment is not enough to lift and keep all families out of poverty (Robben, Van Lancker & Hermans, 2021). The minimum income in Flanders is usually not sufficient to be able to live in dignity and also the impact of social benefits is often insufficient. Social housing does make a big difference, but the waiting lists are getting longer (Frederickx, M. et al., 2021). In an article on sociaal.net, Julie Vinck and Wim Van Lancker are critical about Flemish poverty policy. The authors argue that the authorities did the opposite of what was needed by not being selective enough in their measures to increase incomes and by being not universal enough in their measures to compensate the costs.

In 2017, the European Social Policy Network reviewed the implementation of the policy measures tackling child poverty since the Commission's recommendation of 20 February 2013 to invest in children and break the vicious circle of disadvantage. The researchers conclude:

> *"Given the persistent very high levels of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion across the EU, it is worrying that more efforts have not been made in more countries in all categories to further strengthen their policies/approaches and programmes. There is a considerable way to go to ensure really effective and energetic implementation of the Recommendation." (Frazier & Marlier, 2017)*

Also for children and young people with disabilities, the authorities fail to achieve basic rights such as (inclusive) education and (inclusive) leisure activities for all children. The waiting lists for appropriate care, support and personal assistance are getting longer and the social efforts in terms of accessibility remain insufficient (Grip vzw, 2016). The authorities are also not taking enough decisive and in-depth action against racism and discrimination (Kinderrechtencoalitie, 2015) and the basic rights of children and young people seeking refuge are being compromised (Kinderrechtencommissariaat, 2023).

5.2 Participation remains a challenge

5.2.1 Participation as an aim or a means

Participation is both about participation as an aim and participation as a means (co-decision-making). Several studies show that social exclusion still causes certain groups of children and

young people to participate less in the existing offer of education, care and leisure that can enhance their development. However, there are a number of positive indications that targeted measures and investments can help to boost their participation, with positive effects as a result. For example, research by the RAY Network showed how young people with fewer opportunities get more learning outcomes from European exchanges than other young people.

Nevertheless, we must also take a critical look at the importance we attach to 'participating'. In her speech on '*social integration as an elusive perspective*', Sabrina Keinemans (2020) describes how social integration has become a guiding principle in our society. But, as Keinemans points out: *"'Participating' is more than participating in social institutions. It also means participating in the ideal of a good life as is dominant in our society."* That ideal of a good life does not stem from a general consensus, but is determined by *"a part of society that manages to leave its mark on notions of a good life and good coexistence as expressed in the social debate."*

In her speech, Keinemans argues that this ideal is elusive for some groups.

> *"Integration as an elusive perspective, therefore, means first of all that participation in society and the ideal of the good life proposed herein, does not become more attainable for some people. On the contrary: despite efforts, it always seems to disappear behind the horizon. Because participating is not successful, but also because participation does not always come with the promised good life and good coexistence. The lives and coexistence of the targeted people do not always benefit from this participation, and stimulating it therefore mainly helps to maintain the status quo. Nevertheless, or precisely thanks to that fact, as Berlant and Lorey argue, the ideal of integration is kept alive and is considered worth pursuing throughout society. The mere fact that we are still talking about integration and participation as a solution to social issues after 30 years, while segregation still persists, is a sign of this. Berlant calls this cruel optimism: people feel connected to ideals and goals that are actually beyond their reach and are therefore an illusion. In short: the ideal of 'the good life' and the pursuit of integration has become entrenched in the hearts and minds of many. And because of this, inequality and exclusion are not fundamentally tackled."*

This can be particularly painful, Keinemans argues, especially for young people.

> *"Young people want to be part of a way of life. And it is precisely this internalisation of that ideal that can harm people, in many ways. For example, because it is hurtful to be rejected again and again in their efforts to participate in the labour market or in social contexts, but also because it can be exhausting to constantly strive for something that is actually beyond their reach. But above all, because cruel optimism is motivated by the desire to belong, that will never be fulfilled for many people. As Berlant puts it: '[…] belonging isn't an apriori but something that must be purchased by participation in the everyday economy' (2011, p. 171). In other words, belonging is not something that is a given for people, it is something that must be pursued by participating in the rat race of everyday life."*

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding of the psychological consequences of exclusion and discrimination. One risk of this, however, is that structural, social mechanisms are reduced to their individual, psychological consequences. This can lead to the further strengthening of an individual blame model or individual accident model in which the cause of poverty or discrimination is attributed to the individuals themselves and to their inability to react

autonomously and resiliently to situations they find themselves in, because of their own fault or for reasons they cannot control.

5.2.2 Participation as a means: co-deciding

It is therefore essential that children and young people with fewer opportunities can make their voices heard in the way in which organisations shape their youth work and the way in which we shape our society. Although the rights of the child are enshrined in the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child, there is a gap between the frameworks for children's participation rights in democratic and political life and the implementation of these frameworks in areas that affect children's daily lives. We distinguish three problems.

- First, there is a lack of representation and inclusiveness. In a European survey, 70% of the children consulted indicated that they would like to participate more in decision-making (UNICEF, 2021) and only 7% of children feel truly heard (UNICEF & Eurochild, 2019). For specific groups, the problem is even more tangible. Younger children, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with a migration background are generally underrepresented in participation mechanisms, according to an EU mapping study (2021b). Children with disabilities rarely participate in participation mechanisms themselves, but are more likely to be represented by an NGO or by adults who represent their interests.

A second problem is a lack of sustainability and continuity. Children's participation rights in decision-making processes can only be successful if they guarantee a certain degree of sustainability and continuity that is obtained through a clear governance model. The EU mapping study mentions children's councils, children's parliaments and ombudspersons as strong mechanisms to create such governance models. However, these mechanisms seem to work more strongly at European and national level than at regional and local level due to funding problems and facilitation by adults.

Finally, children exercise a limited influence on policy development and implementation. Their influence is limited to agenda setting and their recommendations are often non-binding (EU, 2021). Even though children in Europe are invited to discuss specific topics (e.g. bullying, gender equality, health and well-being, technology etc.), they are no longer involved after the consultation.

Professionals often lack the skills, resources or time to address issues of inclusivity, sustainability and impact of children's participation. According to the report 'Our Europe, Our Rights, Our Future', "*it is possible that the relatively low level of awareness and respect for [participation] rights is the result of a lack of training in the field of children's rights for many professionals*". The mapping study (European Commission, 2021b) states that many adult facilitators of children's participation processes do not have the skills to help children participate. Nevertheless, there are also positive indications that targeted policy is successful, as shown, for example, in an evaluation on participant inclusion levels in the EU Youth Dialogue.

5.3 Does diversity put pressure on social cohesion and solidarity?

Typically, social cohesion is seen as the result of social inclusion (Levitas, e.a., 2007). The prospect of social cohesion would encourage citizens to show solidarity, not only to improve the fate of their fellow citizens, but also out of enlightened self-interest. In terms of policy, social cohesion is sometimes also used as a flagship for measures that promote social inclusion. However, the interconnectedness between social inclusion, social cohesion and solidarity seems to be under pressure. The distance between citizens seems to be widening, society is said to become harsher and more individualistic and solidarity seems to narrow down to one's own circle or to initiatives and groups with which people feel enough affinity.

5.3.1 Does ethnic-cultural diversity lead to less social cohesion?

Sometimes, increased ethnic-cultural diversity is identified as the cause of less social cohesion (Putnam, 2007; Jenissen, et al., 2018). Inhabitants of a (super)diverse neighbourhood report that they know their neighbours less well, that mutual trust is waning and that social cohesion decreases. This research is strongly contested, with various points of criticism and reactions to that criticism. It is plausible that diversity causes discomfort or unease and that different reference frames can complicate social relationships. It is also plausible that people find more comfort in homogeneously composed groups, as Arend van Haaften described in his research on ethnic diversity in sports clubs.

Nevertheless, it is very premature to conclude that ethnic-cultural diversity effectively leads to less social cohesion. As indicated, social cohesion is a very vague concept that can be given different interpretations. The question is therefore how researchers define and operationalise social cohesion. For example, Dutch researchers use the sense of security to measure social cohesion. But this raises the question whether a sense of security is based solely on factual contacts or also on perception, which can be influenced by one-sided media coverage. (Van Eijk, 2019)

In addition, local residents also contrast their perception of the neighbourhood with their beliefs and ideals about how that neighbourhood should or could function. We can refer to what Willem Schinkel calls an organic vision of society.

> *"In this organic vision, society is represented as a social body, the mutual parts of which may or may not be well coordinated with each other, and thus may or may not be integrated. Inadequate integration is not only a problem for individuals, but above all for society as a whole, and therefore for all of us. Schinkel describes how this organic approach to society has been dominant in the thinking of sociologists and political scientists for centuries, from Plato to Durkheim to Parsons. Moreover, it is a slightly idealistic approach, as it assigns appreciation to unity and stability (the integration) of the whole. Integration is therefore assumed to be a prerequisite for the good life and good coexistence of citizens." (Keinemans, 2020)*

Citizens can also cherish a romantic or nostalgic image of a past in which, in their eyes, there were fewer differences between them and more straightforward contacts, resulting in more underlying cohesion. They might forget that there used to be socio-economic or philosophical

differences or rivalries between neighbourhoods or municipalities. The idea that society used to be more harmonious might indicate a nostalgia for a world that never really existed.

Moreover, the statements people make about their neighbourhood do not yet say anything about their actual behaviour. For example, Gwen van Eijk points out that "*people in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood spoke more negatively about neighbourhood contacts than in an ethnically homogeneous neighbourhood, but that it had no impact on the number of actual contacts with neighbours and the intensity of the contacts. In ethnically homogeneous neighbourhoods, people also see other social divides. Judgments and activities don't always match." (Van Eijk, 2019)*

Finally, we also notice that (local) authorities can take successful measures that can enhance informal contacts between local residents, such as initiatives in the Netherlands for public familiarity and kwartiermaken (neighbourhood building). We also see in research into social inclusion in youth work how youth activities can support children and young people in dealing with differences amongst them (Smets, et al., 2021).

5.3.2 Does ethnic-cultural diversity lead to less solidarity?

A few years ago, a large-scale study in Flanders dealt with the question of solidarity in diversity. The underlying concern was that the traditional sources of solidarity, such as interdependence, shared norms and values, a common social struggle and encounters were under pressure due to increasing ethnic-cultural diversity (Jans, 2014). This concern leads some scientists and politicians to argue for "*more cultural integration and assimilation. They underline that solidarity in Western European welfare states is strongly based on the idea of one territory, one community and one culture. In order to strengthen the sense of belonging between the inhabitants of a country, they say, it is necessary to make everyone part of a national culture with shared norms and values." (Oosterlynck, 2013)*

The researchers point out that this strategy is too demanding for many newcomers.

> *"Many of them find themselves at the bottom of the labour market and thus in the margins of mainstream society. This subordinate socio-economic position does not encourage cultural assimilation. Their own culture is often their main source of pride and self-confidence. Why would they give it up without any perspective of socio-economic improvement? In addition, ethnic-cultural minorities can stay in touch with their country of origin and friends and family elsewhere in the world more than was the case in the past. The national state as a framework for cultural socialisation thus loses importance compared to international communication networks. The cultural integration model therefore offers little potential in times of superdiversity, especially if it coincides with socio-economic disadvantage, which is still too often the case today." (Oosterlynck, 2013)*

The Diegem study set out to find a new model for how solidarity can take shape in diversity and found the answer in shared spaces.

> *"Whether it's the workplace, the playground, the sports field or the street: spaces bring people from all kinds of backgrounds physically closer together. Precisely because space often is the only thing we*

still share, we believe it provides a good basis for solidarity in a superdiverse society. New forms of solidarity in diversity arise from taking a shared responsibility for the places where we work, learn, live or relax – whether or not willingly and whether or not forced. After all, such small-scale intersections of diversity offer the opportunity to experience in a very informal way how to best deal with different points of view. They are also places where citizens learn to take up responsibility in very tangible practices. Despite their differences, this can also encourage them to join forces for very concrete issues." (Oosterlynck, 2013)

These shared places also carry a risk of creating islands of solidarity with insiders and outsiders. *"Only by also taking into account the relationships with other spaces does a real alternative come into view. Because of migration and superdiversity, each space is connected to many spaces far away. This enables innovative forms of solidarity that transcend the boundaries of a factory, a street or a neighbourhood." (Oosterlynck, 2013)*

5.3.3 How do policymakers see the relationship between diversity, social cohesion and solidarity?

In a recent study, researchers from UGent (University of Ghent) studied how policymakers interpret and operationalise social cohesion (Dierckx, Vandenbroeck & Devlieghere, 2023). The researchers note that social cohesion is interpreted in many different ways. In a minimal interpretation, the focus lies on social networks and social capital. Social cohesion then becomes a lever and a responsibility for individuals and families to build a network that helps them move on in life. In a minimal interpretation, policymakers tend to see ethnic-cultural diversity as a threat to social cohesion because there is a perception that language barriers or different habits and practices will complicate the development of a social network. In the broadest interpretation, politicians take a holistic look and see interconnections with the society at large. The focus then lies on community building, with a central and fundamental role for the involvement and participation of citizens and a link to the realisation of social rights.

The researchers did notice how few policymakers make the link between social cohesion and solidarity.

"What is striking in our analyses – especially in the interviews with policymakers – is the minimal references to social cohesion as solidarity, as since Emile Durkheim, solidarity has been inextricably linked to social cohesion in academic literature (Duhaime et al., 2004) … The absence of solidarity in the different interpretations leaves us with the question of whether solidarity remains orphaned in the conceptualisations of social cohesion." (Dierckx, Vandenbroeck & Devlieghere, 2023)

The researchers point out that we have to be careful with an excessive instrumentalisation and individualisation of social cohesion.

"It should be noted that social cohesion regularly seems to be instrumentalised at the level of the individual, in order to intervene at the level of society. In this way, the creation of the social fabric potentially becomes an individual responsibility. This is a development we need to take care about, and that we may wish to counteract with a maximalist interpretation of social cohesion, abandoning the necessity of value homogeneity (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, p. 590) and replacing it with a political commitment to collective solidarity. In this respect, policy should guarantee the opportunity

for every individual to participate, based on a set of inclusionary principles (Appiah et al., 1994; Parekh, 2001).” (Dierckx, Vandenbroeck & Devlieghere, 2023)

The minimal implementation of social cohesion can also lead governments to discourage or prohibit ethnic-cultural minorities or other groups from organising themselves on the basis of traits that unite them. Under the motto of social cohesion, policymakers encourage these groups – despite the existing exclusion mechanisms – to connect to society by conforming to prevailing habits and customs. Regardless of whether this is feasible (see above), this strategy can lead to discrimination and injustice if only specific groups are targeted by this policy. Michael Sandel refers to what he calls the *‘skyboxification’* of society.

> *“We increasingly live, work and shop in different places. In the past, for example, at a sports competition, all social classes mixed. Nowadays, the rich sit in skyboxes, far away from the common people. I call this the ‘skyboxification’ of society. I think that's a loss. Moreover, it is not good for democracy. We don't all need to be equal, but we do need to be able to meet on a regular basis. Only that way, we can continue to talk to each other about the public interest." (Sandel, M. in Drayer, E., 2012)*

It still makes sense that public authorities encourage citizens to meet each other across differences, but then it is only fair that they expect this from all citizens. Targeting one group and ignoring the other takes policy further away from the inclusive society it envisions and reinforces the social vulnerability it wants to avoid.

Another policy aspect in which solidarity and diversity meet is in the societalisation of care. Jo Vandeurzen, who launched this concept as Flemish Minister of Welfare, sees societalisation as a verb.

> "*It is an unrelenting plea to give vulnerable fellow citizens a place in this hectic society. Societalisation means building engagement and forming a community with vulnerable people." And this out of the conviction that: "we will only achieve more inclusivity if we succeed – and that is what I mean by societalisation – in asking the whole of society, all levels of governance and all policy domains to pay attention to people with fewer opportunities. By the way, sooner or later we will all be in such a situation."* (Vandeurzen, 2018)

To secure the future of care, there is a growing awareness that a society needs both professional care and informal care. And also, people who want to take up and pay for this care. This means that they should take up care directly (so-called ‘warm’ or ‘direct’ solidarity) but also contribute financially to social services that support care and support (the ‘cold’ or ‘indirect’ solidarity). Both need to be strengthened. But several authors also point to the tension between a government policy that promotes autonomy and care at the same time (Roets, et al., 2018). According to them, societalisation is based on the idea of active citizenship. *“The underlying image of humanity refers to freedom of choice, self-direction and self-determination. People should be in control of their lives. The ideal image of the active, empowered, motivated and autonomous citizen is paramount."* But the authors wonder *“to what extent this view of humanity is fiction for each of us. And to what extent this view of humanity is at odds with the reality in which everyone needs more or less care and support at certain moments during their lives."*

Finally, we also notice a tendency in society to frame certain groups as 'taking advantage' of social security and to create the image that people in poverty or people with a migration background get much more out of the mechanisms of solidarity than they contribute to it. Although this is blatantly incorrect (see, among others, Strobants & Joseph, 2022), it does not seem obvious for policymakers to counter this image with a narrative of mutual solidarity.

5.1.4 Conclusion

We found no evidence that ethic-cultural diversity puts pressure on social cohesion and solidarity. Citizens sometimes need encouragement and mediation to meet each other across differences. It is worthwhile for public authorities to stimulate these encounters, but for all citizens. Policymakers should be aware that an individualistic view of humanity, an instrumental interpretation of social cohesion and an overemphasis on direct solidarity, weaken rather than strengthen solidarity between citizens. A narrative that shows interconnectedness and reciprocity and that encourages people to take responsibility together for the places where they meet, will offer more guarantees in the long term for the solidarity we need to successfully meet the challenges of an inclusive society.

6. What are the challenges and priorities in terms of social inclusion of young people?

Creating an inclusive society for young people poses major challenges for policymakers. Despite the large consensus on its importance and the many efforts and policies put in place, social exclusion and discrimination remain persistent and complex issues. Policymakers don't control everything. Nevertheless, they have instruments and levers that can promote social inclusion. Three examples are: (1) safeguarding and strengthening social participation, (2) equal access to basic services, a decent standard of living and equal rights, and (3) a fair transition to a green economy.

6.1 Safeguarding and strengthening social participation

People who are faced with social exclusion feel that today's society and the way in which services, organisations and society at large are organised do not take sufficient account of their presence in that society. (Social) inclusion means not only supporting individuals and families to find their way in society as it is, but also "*inviting those who have been left out (in any way) to come in, and asking them to help design new systems that encourage every person to participate to the fullness of their capacity as partners and as members*" (Forest & Pearpoint in: Zemni, S. & Ben Yakoub, J., 2018).

Social inclusion is about participation, both in the sense of participating as a goal and of participating as a means (co-deciding). As we mentioned earlier, this participation continues to be skewed and difficult, for children and young people in general and for young people with fewer opportunities in particular. However, several sources show that specific and targeted efforts to enhance participation pay off. Through these efforts, children and young people can be successfully involved. They have sensible things to say about the interpretation and organisation of the leisure offer, but also about topics such as exclusion and discrimination. They are the experts of their own lifeworld.

For many generations, collective organisation and mobilisation were the ideal way for citizens to achieve social change. This dynamic seems to be losing its (attractive) power. The growing conviction is that there are few workable alternatives to the way we currently organise our society. The rising expectation is that children and young people need to find their way in society as it is, particularly starting from their own strengths and resilience. Even though the social ideal keeps slipping away from a growing group of children and young people, we continue to believe in this *cruel optimism*. There are indications that children and young people themselves are also putting less and less faith in the usefulness of collective organisation and in the ability of citizens to change society. Based on a certain interpretation of social cohesion, public authorities seem less and less inclined to allow critical and dissonant voices. Some organisations or services that work with public funds and are assigned a 'connecting' role experience pressure to refrain from voicing their social criticism if they want to (continue to) receive public funding.

Given that participation is such an essential ingredient of an inclusive society, we advocate for safeguarding and further strengthening it. It remains important that public authorities leave

space for civil society and support organisations that facilitate the active citizenship of children and young people, including especially those who face social exclusion. We refer to research reports and recommendations by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights from 2018 and 2023, to a report by the European Youth Forum (2020) and to two overview studies commissioned by the Youth Partnership between the EU and the Council of Europe: Young people's right to assemble peacefully and Shrinking democratic civic space for youth.

Council conclusions from 2021 advocate for the preservation of existing and the creation of new public spaces for young people that enable their meaningful participation in society. Socius offers more theoretical background on the civil perspective and a 2021 publication by Eurochild shows how the participation of children contributes to the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

6.2 Equal access to basic services, a decent standard of living and equal rights

From the perspective of both social inclusion and children's rights, we emphasise the need to structurally improve the living conditions in which children and young people grow up. We see three major building blocks for this: (1) providing access to basic services, (2) strengthening family income and providing social protection, and (3) granting access to rights and combating discrimination. We specifically draw attention to the situation of children and young people seeking refuge.

6.2.1 Access to basic services

We therefore encourage European countries - in line with the Council conclusions of June 2022 - to implement the EU Child Guarantee in their national strategies and thus provide free and effective access to a range of basic services: free childcare, free education, healthy food, free healthcare and adequate housing. In a 2021 report, the European Social Policy Analysis Network provides an overview of children's current access to these basic services. In a 2022 report, Eurochild analyses which policies the various European countries are developing in function of the EU Child Guarantee.

Several experts point to the importance of childcare to stimulate the development of children and to combat intergenerational transmission of poverty (Vanobbergen, 2016; Robben, et al., 2017; King Baudouin Foundation, s.d.). Their position differs from the increasing trend to reserve childcare for working parents.

In its annual report on the Children's rights in Flanders, the Kinderrechtencommissariaat (the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner) draws attention to the shortage of places in special-needs education, in professional education (B-stroom), in vocational education and in the onthaalklassen voor anderstalige nieuwkomers (entry-level classes for foreign-speaking newcomers). Not only is this a violation of children's and young people's rights, but a lack of appropriate education also hinders the social inclusion of children and young people. The transport of children to special-needs schools also remains a point of attention. A recent investment in collective school transport paid off and ensured that most children spend less than 90 minutes to get to/from school. Nevertheless, this is still a lot of time, which deprives children

and young people of opportunities to develop further after school. The target should be 60 minutes, according to the Kinderrechtcommissariaat (the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner). To this end, broader mobility support needs to be considered, a challenge that transcends various policy areas.

The housing problem has risen sharply in recent years, with a growing understanding of homelessness among children and young people and the less visible reality of the so-called 'sofa sleepers'. The most recent overview of the number of homeless people in Belgium can be found in this report. Researchers from UGent (Ghent University), KULeuven and UCLouvain (Catholic Universities of Leuven and Louvain) zoom in on the experiences of young adults. The King Baudouin Foundation points out the importance of housing in the fight against child poverty. Sociaal.net created a file on this subject and the Dutch organisation Movisie gathered working practices.

Flemish authorities also drew up an 'actieplan ter voorkoming en bestrijding van dak- en thuisloosheid 2020-2024' (action plan to prevent and combat homelessness). The European Union member states, the European Commission and their partners developed an action plan to completely eradicate homelessness from European streets by 2030. We encourage both the Flemish community and the EU Member States to implement the action plans mentioned above.

For an inclusive society, it is crucial that appropriate help and support is also provided to children and young people who need it. The pressure on young people is increasing and their mental well-being is decreasing. It remains a core task for the public authorities to provide enough appropriate help and to make it sufficiently available and affordable for all children and young people. The annual report of the Kinderrechtencommissariaat (the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner) in Flanders points out the precarious state of youth care work. The Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner points to the need for a master plan for youth care that goes beyond the current crisis plan to alleviate the most urgent needs.

The EU also pays attention to the mental well-being of children and young people, including through the Joint Action on Health and Well-being from 2013. Youth Goal # 5 of the European Youth Strategy (2021-2027) is about mental health and mental well-being. Recently Council conclusions on this topic were published under the Spanish Presidency of the EU.

6.2.2 Strengthening family income and providing social protection

With the many accompanying and compensatory measures governments take in many areas of life, they can succeed in mitigating the negative effects of poverty. However, household income remains at the heart of the problem. Employment is an important lever to strengthen family income, but it does not work for everyone: the group of the 'working' poor is increasing. Moreover, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. Several scientists point out that the current measures are insufficient to close the widening gap between rich and poor and to provide all citizens with a decent standard of living (Vinck & Van Lancker, 2018; Somers, 2019; Cantillon, 2021). Bea Cantillon calls for a revised social contract to find a way out of the negative spiral that is pushing a growing group of citizens deeper and deeper into poverty.

"Wrong policy choices and inefficiencies explain why the welfare state cannot find an answer to the poverty problem, for sure. But there's more going on. The simultaneous increase in wealth, employment and social expenditure on the one hand, and poverty on the other, points to a systemic problem. The ageing population, the climate transition and digital transformation will make this problem even more acute in the future. In order to bend the rising poverty curves, a revised social contract is necessary. This should build on the achievements of the post-war welfare state, but with agreements on decent minimum incomes, meaningful work and capital and climate taxes. National welfare states need to cooperate more in a European and global context. to achieve this." (Cantillon, B., 2023)

Cantillon (2021) puts forward various principles and concrete proposals that focus both on local, innovative citizens' initiatives that build trust and on connecting with the European initiatives on social rights, minimum wages, minimum incomes and taxation within the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Kinderrechtencommissariaat (the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner) calls on the various ministers to work together across different policy levels.

6.2.3 Giving access to rights and combating discrimination

The development of an inclusive society for young people is closely linked to the rights of young people to shape their lives. Civil rights were established at national, European and international level. In 2000, for example, the EU laid down its Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Various European institutions and agencies monitor the compliance with these rights and the first decades of the 21st century saw an increase in policy initiatives to safeguard and strengthen these rights (Potočnik, 2021). But this does not mean that all citizens enjoy their rights in the same way. Young people in general, and children and young people with fewer opportunities in particular, are at increased risk of not having their rights met. Since the 2000s, the EU has increasingly recognised its youth population as a specific target group, with growing attention to the discrimination of young people and within the group of young people as a result. In 2016, the Council of Europe wrote an explicit recommendation to increase young people's access to their rights. It drew attention to age discrimination and to the further discrimination within the youth population.

"The recommendation aims to improve young people's access to rights rather than addressing the specific rights themselves. It focuses on improving access by taking steps to promote awareness of the rights that young people should be able to enjoy and what they can do if their rights are violated, and by removing legal, political and social barriers. It emphasises the importance of Member States regularly monitoring and responding to rights infringements and ensuring adequate protection although legal provisions." (Council of Europe, 2016).

The 3rd European Youth Goal 'Inclusive Societies' - part of the EU Youth Strategy- explicitly refers to the importance of access to equal rights for young people:

"One third of young people in Europe are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Many do not have access to their social rights. Many continue to face multiple discrimination, experience prejudice and hate crimes. New migratory phenomena brought several social and inclusion challenges. Therefore, it is crucial to work towards the fulfilment of the rights of all young people in Europe, including the most marginalised and excluded." (EU Council Resolution, 2018)

Nevertheless, various studies and reports at national and European level indicate that, to date, this access has not yet been fully realised. The COVID-19 crisis painfully exposed the social position of young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, as we read in the European Commission's report on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy. In the final declaration of the Third Youth Work Convention, we read:

> *"Young people from particularly marginalised groups facing multiple discrimination are particularly stricken as social inequalities increase and social justice is further away. It is young people, however, who also display creativity and imagination, and demonstrate resilience, when facing uncertainties and disruption in their lives. They should be able to do so while having full access to exercise their rights. However, many young people are still denied their rights or remain unaware of them and, as a result, are unable to express their views and voice effectively. Those 'active' and 'empowered' young people who do articulate their needs, perspectives and convictions are, too often, overlooked or ignored by the societies and communities in which they live."* (European Youth Work Convention, 2022)

We therefore point out the importance of a policy that informs young people about their rights and supports them as much as possible to access these rights.

6.2.4 Special attention to children and young people seeking refuge

In its annual report, the Kinderrechtencommissariaat (the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner) devotes a chapter to the rights of children and young people seeking refuge. These rights are under pressure in the Flemish Community due to a lack of emergency shelter for young people and families with children. Unaccompanied minors lack appropriate care and legal representatives. Not having a guardian triggers additional problems and rights violations. Finally, the annual report mentions the pressure of family reunification expectations on minor refugees.

At European level too, various institutions and organisations are asking attention for this theme. For example, the Council of Europe worked on the transition to adulthood of young refugees. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights collected good practices and challenges and mapped the policies in various European countries. UNICEF launched a digital tool to strengthen the mental well-being of young refugees.

6.3 Fair transition to a green economy

Recently, an expert panel set out the guidelines for a just transition in Belgium (Cantillon & Hudon, 2023). In their policy memorandum, they outline this transition in three dimensions:

> *"1. Strengthening and achieving ecological goals from local to global level to protect current generations, future generations and nature. 2. Strengthening social rights, especially for the most vulnerable; the socially equitable sharing of the burdens and benefits of the ecological transition, and the adequate protection of those who will be victims of climate disasters. 3. Strengthening mechanisms for democratic participation in decision-making in these areas." (Cantillon, B. & Hudon, M., 2023)*

The panel members describe in the memorandum how the groups that contribute least to the ecological changes are the most affected by the health risks associated with these changes. These groups benefit less from the positive measures that promote environmentally friendly alternatives and suffer proportionally more disadvantages from the price increases that are intended to discourage the use of fossil fuels. These groups are also underrepresented in decision-making on environmental policy. The authors therefore advocate for linking social and ecological goals.

> *"The transition to a sustainable and fair future has to take place in an integrated way: environmental and social issues need to be tackled simultaneously. Therefore, the social dimension needs to be at the heart of the ecological transition and the social welfare state has to be transformed into a social-ecological welfare state. The social pacts after the Second World War added social responsibilities to the economic and security functions of the public authorities. Now, the social welfare state also has to take up sustainability functions." (Cantillon, B. & Hudon, M., 2023)*

The EU also recognises that a sustainable society has to ensure a fair and inclusive transition for all (EU Council Conclusions, 2022/C 159/07). In the May 2023 Council conclusions on the social dimension of a sustainable Europe for youth, European countries draw attention to the interdependence of sustainable development, social inclusion and democratic participation.

> *"Addressing the social dimension of sustainable development is a crucial aspect to empowering vulnerable groups in society. Issues of sustainable development are intersectional. Socioeconomic exclusion and democratic exclusion go hand in hand, affecting the extent to which young people are able to engage in actions for sustainable development. Achieving fair, sustainable and inclusive development through democratic processes needs to take all perspectives and opinions into account, via the principles of free speech and press freedom and through inclusive processes at all levels." (Council of the EU, 2023)*

In 2022, SALTO Inclusion & Diversity organised a seminar on Green Inclusion together with a number of partners. The report of this encounter identifies the challenges, strengths and needs of youth organisations, gives tips and formulates recommendations.

This theme is also given more attention beyond Europe, for instance in this report by the Global Green Growth Institute, the International Institute for Environment and Development and the Green Economy Coalition.

7. What are workable models for the social inclusion of children and young people?

In the last part of this text, we outline a number of workable models and strategies that can enhance the social inclusion of children and young people. These are mainly models that enable participation to, in and by an empowering educational offer. This offer broadens and strengthens children's and young people's capacity to act and is closely connected to their lifeworld: their neighbourhood, school and leisure time. Faced with exclusion and discrimination, it can be appealing for policymakers and practitioners to invest in positive and concrete initiatives that make a tangible difference in the lives of children and young people. The pitfall, however, is that the responsibility for social inclusion is given to volunteers, teachers, bridge builders, community and youth workers, but also to the children and young people and their parents themselves in order to take matters into their own hands and find their own way despite all structural hurdles.

The models below invite to take action, but also require critical reflection on the social context in which they are used. Social inclusion should not only eliminate the negative consequences of exclusion and discrimination, but also tackle its causes and question the norms and expectations of society. Especially for children and young people in poverty, the models we propose below can only really 'work' if family income improves. This requires a broader policy that combats underprotection, redistributes incomes better, guarantees decent housing and makes basic services available to everyone (King Baudouin Foundation, s.d.). Moreover, an overview such as the one we present here is not a menu that you can freely pick from, but a coherent set of interventions that interlink and reinforce each other.

> *"A policymaker who individualises the problem will choose a dish that places responsibility mainly on the individual. Those who mainly think of saving costs will choose the cheapest portion. But poverty policy does not tolerate cherry picking. Above all, it needs to tackle the cause of the problems: the scarcity in which people have to make decisions. How useful is parenting support if the cause of parenting problems, the lack of income, is not addressed? Reducing child poverty will inevitably have to start from the beginning: providing sufficient and accessible income protection for the whole family." (Van Lancker, W., 2023)*

Numerous types of organisations offer educational support but not on a level playing field. Social norms and expectations have a structural influence on the regulations and funding conditions for organisations working towards the inclusion of children and young people with disabilities or with a migration background. There are power dynamics between the organisers in the field (Demos, s.d.). And the government does not always provide sufficient support to achieve inclusion

> *"There are a lot of small, exciting initiatives aimed at inclusion. So don't get me wrong, I'm optimistic about that in itself. For example, the Flemish authorities recently launched a '123 inclusion' campaign. The campaign highlights beautiful stories. (…) The problem is that the authorities still offer too little support. They also don't create a sense urgency. Belgium has signed the UN convention that explicitly states that segregated education has to disappear. But that idea is not catching on. Not in policies, not in education, not in political parties. While we are conversing here, the rights of young people with*

disabilities are being violated. In schools, adaptations are refused and inaccessibility remains." (Schraepen, B. in Bogaert, P.J., 2022)

An empowering offer helps children and young people and their families to find their path in society as it is, but also supports them to critically distance themselves from that society. An emancipatory practice thematises what is structurally wrong, investigates together with the end users what changes are needed and together sets up actions that trigger this change.

"We do not see (a) social worker (...) primarily as a problem solver who helps to repair the vulnerability of individual marginalised people so that they 'catch up' with society again. It would mean that we stay within the boundaries of an existing social order and don't help make it evolve. Social workers, on the other hand, operate in those places where coexistence takes place, because that is where the opportunity arises to help the lives of those who are in danger of disappearing into the cracks of the system, but above all because that is where the opportunity arises to make coexistence progress. In fact, social workers have to look for those places, because it is only from that specific friction that they can give substance to their profession. So, I do not position social workers in the mainstream, they do not make music in the 'main melody' of society, but they always look for the rough edges, the dissonant tones, without being guided by a preconceived ideal of living together." (Keinemans, S., 2020)

In this sense, it is not only important what you do from the list below, but also how you relate to the children and young people in question. Not only the outcomes of the offer count, but also and perhaps most importantly how you shape this offer and the quality of the relationships you enter into with the end users as an organiser or facilitator.

"People in poverty hate poverty. They fight it, but lose that fight. That's why many professionals think they're not trying, but that's not true. Poverty is a violation of the right to respect. (…) People in poverty experience this on a daily basis: they are treated as if they are inferior. They are not seen as fully-fledged human beings with dreams, knowledge and inspiration. Again and again, they experience micro-aggressions and humiliations. Also from social professionals. Hence (my) plea to stand with people living in poverty. Do not push or pull people in a certain direction, but stand with them. So don't say: 'This is your problem and this is how we have to solve it'. But say: 'I see that you are doing everything to improve your situation, but unfortunately you are not succeeding. How can I help you succeed?'" (Michal Krumer-Nevo in Develtere, L., 2023)

7.1 Bottom-up and outreach work

When children and young people and their families face difficulties finding a support offer or service, it can be a good choice to reach out to the target group. In recent years, this practice has gained a lot of popularity. A study by the HOGent (university college) is working on a conceptual framework to map the multitude of forms outreach work can take. The use of the term 'outreach work' does require some caution. *"Not everyone who leaves their own office is doing outreach work"* (Dewaele, C., 2022). It is certainly a valuable strategy to reach out to people, but if your goal is too narrowly defined, it does not fully fit the definition of 'outreach work'. *"This is contrary to the typical outreach workers, who do not choose their goals themselves. Their goals depend on what the client needs and often depend even more on what is happening at that time."* (Dewaele, C., 2022)

A recent study commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation draws lessons from ten outreach projects during the COVID-19 pandemic towards families in poverty. In an article on sociaal.net, Demos staff discuss the added value of this approach for leisure providers. Bridge persons or bridge builders also use this strategy (see below) to connect children and young people with a useful leisure offer. The publication Reach out! from 2014 is a source of inspiration for practitioners based on three years of practice research and development.

7.2 Proximity and trust relationships, useful (individual) help, support

A second important element is building a relationship of trust. Participation usually precedes the relationship. Children and young people participate in an offer and gradually bond with the other participants and with the educators. Children and young people with fewer opportunities attach particular importance to these trust relationships. They require special attention from the educator. Within education as well as within youth (care) work, attention is paid to warm relationships. The 'Presence' approach of Andries Baart can offer inspiration to youth workers, as this article shows. In a study on the role of facilitators in social circus, the authors consider the relationship as the most important 'gift' that the facilitators give to the participants. Facilitators 'give' their all: they do people favours without expecting anything in return. Through their openness and enthusiasm, their support and encouragement and their equal footing, they create tangible experiences here and now. That act in itself is meaningful for children and young people who are excluded.

> *"The very act of giving and receiving, in a non-linear type of relationship, is crucial and even obligatory for the establishment of safe, meaningful, long-term relationships. Here, the gift does not refer to something material, nor to an exclusive service delivered, but to the very act of putting one's self at disposal. This gift is thrown into the social circus universe and allows those involved to work towards mutual understanding and progress. Trainers give themselves to others and in doing so assert that their presence and existence is acknowledged by these significant others. Each gift is therefore a social connection (Gotbout & Caillé, 1998) and the act of rendering becomes a mechanism that can break the spiral of negative experiences people encounter on a personal and institutional level." (Hannes, K. & Uten, L., 2018)*

7.3 Safe and brave spaces

Earlier in this text, we described how children and young people in youth work but also in other places find space to develop themselves and meet others in an informal way. Youth workers manage this space, facilitate encounters, offer individual support and an empowering offer. These include youth social work organisations, OverKop-huizen ('Time-out' Houses), onthaalklassen voor anderstalige nieuwkomers (entry-level education for foreign-speaking newcomers), youth activities for young people with a migration background, supra-local activities for children and young people with disabilities, social sports practices etc.

In recent years, the term 'safe space' has increasingly been used to indicate the importance of *"a safe environment where people can be themselves without being judged, discriminated against or victims of (physical & psychological) violence. It's a place where people can feel at ease*

with like-minded people." (Cavaria, s.d.). Some organisations also add '(r)' to safe spaces: safe(r) spaces. "*With this, organisations show that they understand that it is impossible to guarantee 100% that everyone feels safe in the space, because each individual has different experiences and needs. What is safe for one person may not be safe for another. The goal remains to offer a safe space to everyone who is present." (Khan, et al., 2021)*

In addition to the attention for 'safe(r) spaces', the importance of 'brave spaces' is also increasing. These are places that support people to safely confront other visions and beliefs. The American university professor John Palfrey *"places safe and brave spaces on a spectrum, where the conversation shifts from safe to brave when the expression of opinion needs less protection. First, he acknowledges that diversity is a necessary condition for a climate of freedom of expression. Without different perspectives, there is no exchange of ideas. Safe spaces are therefore central to 'develop' different perspectives. They are, is as it were, an engine for the emancipation for various groups who feel empowered by meeting like-minded people and can thus shape their vision. Secondly, it is important that these visions are challenged in brave spaces with diverse opinions, in order to nuance the views that were developed in the safe spaces and to enable a rich culture of debate." (Netwerk Wij-Zij, s.d.)*

7.4 Lowering thresholds, inclusion policy, diversity policy

In addition to offering specific spaces where children and young people with fewer opportunities feel safe and can enjoy an empowering youth work offer tailored to their needs, it is important that the offer, that is in principle open to all children and young people, is also inclusive or evolves towards being inclusive. In this way, we enlarge the choice and opportunities for encounters. Various campaigns such as 123 Inclusion or Doemamee ('Join in') focus on raising awareness in youth work, using inspiring examples, playful methods and information. The Ambrassade offers a toolbox for more diversity in youth work. The Komaf project provides information for local organisations on its website and offers training. Various structures support youth organisations and local authorities to make their offer more inclusive step-by-step, as there are the inclusion tour of vzw Oranje or the toolbox of Konekt. The city of Hasselt developed a threshold measure for local associations with a corresponding toolbox. Youth organisations also encourage young people with disabilities and foreign-speaking newcomers to become (co-)animators or youth workers.

The Inclusive Playgrounds project encourages inclusive play infrastructure. More information about inclusive and accessible playgrounds can also be found in this file. A new research project by Kind & Samenleving (Child & Society) draws attention to play opportunities for teenagers with disabilities. Youth organisations can also find guidelines for accessible youth infrastructure. Within youth work, attention for young newcomers has risen sharply in recent years. Initiatives such as WereldSpelers and youth work organisations such as Tumult and Jeugd Rode Kruis (Youth Red Cross) developed targeted initiatives for this target group and developed knowledge and know-how about a game offer and youth worker approach tailored to young newcomers and about access to leisure activities. Local authorities also regularly take initiatives and receive appropriate support for this. As part of their research into the experience of children seeking refuge, Siska van Daele and An Piessens collated various practical sources in a well-organised

library. With the project Speak Out, Act In! Demos empowered youth workers, youth social workers and workers in the sports and cultural sector in how they can deal with discrimination.

Schools receive support in dealing with fewer opportunities through Kleine kinderen, grote kansen (Small children, big opportunities). Childcare initiatives are also supported to improve their accessibility. For the inclusion of children with special care needs in childcare, various tools were developed such as a manual, a roadmap, a reader and a self-reflection tool. The Indy game brings intercultural dynamics to the fore in after-school care and primary schools.

Sport Vlaanderen (Sports Flanders) developed a conceptual framework for inclusion. The Flemish sports federation supports low-threshold sports clubs. Vzw Sportpret (Sports Fun) launched 10 podcasts on sports, poverty and youth work. Younited Belgium published a handbook for sports coaches who fight against vulnerability through football. Boost your sports club (Boes in Dutch) supports clubs in working with non-native speakers. Parantee-Psylos developed a manual to make sports clubs more inclusive and G-sports Flanders supports sports activities for people with disabilities. Urban Youth Games supports inclusion in gymnastics classes at school with inclusive playbooks.

There is also attention for inclusion and diversity within the cultural sector. Organisers lower the threshold for children and young people with fewer opportunities to be spectators or museum visitors, but also as active participants in artistic projects. You will find inspiration in this step-by-step plan for artistic newcomers, in creative projects and spaces for young people, in research and in inclusive performing arts with specific attention to dance education, dance practice and drama. In the circus world too, attention is paid to inclusion under the heading of 'social circus' with publications, case studies and tools.

At the European level, SALTO-YOUTH Inclusion & Diversity supports the inclusion of young people in European exchanges with a wide range of publications and initiatives, such as the Inclusion & Diversity Roadmap, the publications Embracing Diversity and Inclusion A to Z, and the ID Temperature Check self-evaluation tool.

7.5 Mediation (bridge persons, bridge builders, liaison ambassadors)

As we indicated earlier, the number of projects that bring children and young people in contact with youth work and organised leisure activities via bridge persons or bridge builders, and facilitate the encounter and interaction between diverse participants, is increasing. We previously gave an overview of the various projects. Interesting practices are also developing outside of youth work. You can find bridge builders in cities, but also in rural areas, as evidenced in this study by Samenlevensopbouw (Community building). The HIVA study about the 'Overbruggen' project (Bridging) in Leuven paints a good picture of the various profiles and (work) contexts of bridge builders. This publication provides a good overview of the bridge persons who have been active in schools in Ghent for more than 20 years. The integration sector also built up a lot of experience in working with bridge persons.

7.6 Integrated approach- neighbourhood-oriented networks

Locally, many partners are involved in the development of an inclusive society for children and young people: municipal services, poverty associations, self-organisations, employment actors, schools, bridge persons, Kind en Gezin (Child and Family), childcare initiatives, community workers, social housing agencies, leisure and welfare actors. In order to prevent these organisations from working parallel to each-other, various projects and initiatives arise to promote cooperation and networking between organisations and to better coordinate or integrate their offers. In larger municipalities, people expect the level of the district or neighbourhood to make this cooperation and integration possible.

Several of these initiatives are based on a shared commitment to children, such as a youth social work meetings, for example. The Agentschap Opgroeien ('Agency for Growing Up') developed a reference framework for neighbourhood-oriented networks, consisting of three components: core principles, building blocks and practices. Six living labs started working with this reference framework. The experiences from these projects were collated in a toolbox. They also put together an inspirational pack on how to make a difference locally with several tools and an online learning environment. On the website of Agentschap Opgroeien (Agency for Growing Up), you will find various practice examples of how such networks take shape. The Agency wrote a framework text on integrated cooperation. In recent years, initiatives have also been taken to cooperate between youth work and youth social work under the heading Maak tijd vrij (Free up time) and Maak Samen Tijd Vrij (Free Up Time Together). AP Hogeschool (university college) is currently conducting a study into the sustainability of cooperation between youth social work and youth work and the factors that influence this.

Various research projects studied the cooperation between services and organisations in the field of childcare and early school leaving. More broadly, there are also projects and tools that promote collaboration between social professionals such as Resokit (network kit) and buurtconnect (neighbourhood connect). The Arteveldehogeschool (university college) developed the Arrow Roots model of successful cooperation between organisations. The number of initiatives to involve local inhabitants in caring neighbourhoods is also on the rise.

7.7 Participatory work

Working in a participatory way refers to both participating as a goal and participating as a means (co-deciding). Demos puts both concepts on a continuum and offers different strategies for participatory work, from initiation to self-organisation. The organisation also developed a method for participatory project work in three phases: listening, creating and doing. Demos points out the less visible dimensions of participation and also looks at the playing field in which organisations claim space and make space for their activities.

Various websites offer tools to involve children and young people in decision-making processes, such as the participation platform by Kind & Samenleving (Child & Society) or the We are here tool from Eurochild. Some methods pay extra attention to the usability for children and young people with fewer opportunities, for example by using artistic methods.

7.8 Politicising work

In politicising work, the participatory work with children and young people takes on a public dimension. "*Politicisation refers to all initiatives people take to 'make certain issues public'. All the actions they take to draw attention to forms of injustice they encounter and to submit these issues to public debate.*" (Görgöz, Van Bouchaute & Cristiaensen, 2022) The question is how 'public' politicising work should be. Some authors have a broad view on politicising.

> *"The danger of politicising work is that it is never politicising enough and therefore has a paralysing effect. Imagine a social worker in a welfare office who is confronted with families that cannot afford an expensive school trip. At a certain point, she wants to discuss this. She negotiates with the school management and the parents' council. Is that politicising? If we say 'no', then the question arises what would be politicising work then. For me, the context in which she works is politicising, because she engages in a debate with the wider public. Although in a limited context, she makes a problem – what do expensive school trips mean for people in poverty – public. If we present politicising work in this way, it will become more recognisable for social workers. For me, this is not the ultimate format of politicising work, but it is a format that practitioners are able to apply. That's important. Of course, you should then look at how you can take a next step. How you can make the issue even more public... That discussion is more interesting than saying in advance: that is not considered politicising work, because it is not public enough."*
> (Hermans, K. in Vanderhulst, N., 2022)

Uit De Marge (From The Margins) supports youth organisations to work in a politicising way with a publication, a tool and a manual for political participation. Other organisations such as LABO vzw and Tractie also support young people regarding critical citizenship and taking action. Researchers at the Artevelde university college wrote Get up, stand up, a book with practices for politicising work by young people. European research initiatives such as MUST-a-Lab and GOTALK investigate how children and young people can make recommendations at school or about local policy in so-called policy labs.

Also within social work for adults, the attention for politicising work is increasing a lot with articles, a file on sociaal.net in Flanders and on social issues in the Netherlands. Socius, the support centre for socio-cultural work, also focuses on politicising work. Recently, the publication Publiek Gaan (Going public) on politicising action in social work saw the light. In this article , the authors explain this publication in more detail.

7.9 Entering into alliances

Typically, it is people with fewer opportunities and their interest organisations who stand up for equal rights and equal opportunities first. In addition, it is important that people in a more privileged position also take action. *"In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist."* says Angela Y. Davis, an American philosophy professor, civil rights activist and feminist. The South African bishop and activist Desmond Tutu stated: *"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."*

The DieGem study investigated how solidarity takes shape in a superdiverse society and in different areas of life: housing, employment, education and training. In the publication Solidariteit in superdiversiteit (Solidarity in superdiversity, Jans, et al., 2017), the researchers provide a framework for shaping solidarity. The authors outline how 'conviviality' can arise based on places where people meet: peaceful coexistence. On that basis, you can discuss issues that are perceived as unfair. But it only becomes true citizenship when making issues visible and debatable also becomes political and leads to making claims.

Flemish youth work has launched two projects in recent years to promote alliances. With 'OOG voor armoede' (EYE for poverty), the Ambrassade developed a manual for youth activities to enter into dialogue with poverty associations and to take action together. In an article, the organisation provides more background on this project. Together, Uit De Marge (From The Margin) and Chirojeugd Vlaanderen took the initiative to bring youth work organisations together in a network against racism. The network collated testimonies, methods and background information and wrote a vision paper. Anti-racism needs the reaction of bystanders. To help people overcome their shyness to action, there is an increasing range of bystander training courses, also known as active bystander training. Orbit vzw developed a quality framework for strategic alliances.

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