

ESDN Youth Network Policy Note

April 2025

Building Trust and Strengthening Institutions through Youth Engagement

Introduction

Building trust and strengthening institutions was one of four main topics that came out of the ESDN's Youth Workshop 2024, which took place in Berlin on 05-06 September. The Workshop brought together 33 Youth Members from 19 European countries to learn and discuss a sustainable and climate neutral Europe by 2050 through the use of foresight and future scenarios. This Policy Note was written by one of the four thematic subgroups.

Addressing the Core Problem

Effective institutions are ones that citizens can trust and rely upon. However, mistrust often arises due to limited knowledge about institutional roles and processes. This lack of trust is further exacerbated by perceived inaccessibility, where younger generations may feel disconnected from decision-making mechanisms. These issues highlight the importance of democratic structures, transparency, and security within institutions, supported by education and youth engagement.

Defining Strong Institutions

Trust and strong institutions are the foundation of a stable and prosperous society. Our definition of strong institutions emphasizes several key characteristics. First, **democratic structures are essential**, and which incorporate both bottom-up and top-down approaches to ensure that all segments of society are represented and given a voice. **A balance of power is crucial**, with checks and balances in place to prevent the concentration of authority, and which **promote fairness and accountability**.

Strong institutions must also **remain open to innovation** by adapting to new ideas and technologies to stay relevant in an ever-changing world. Strong institutions need **strong leadership**, where leaders take full responsibility for their actions and decisions.

Effective communication, both internally and between states, should focus on strategic and essential issues. **Collaboration with diverse stakeholders**, including civil society, the private sector, and international organizations, is vital to fostering shared goals and strengthening the institution's impact.

Finally, **meaningful engagement** ensures inclusivity and diversity at all levels by providing real opportunities for participation and ensuring that everyone has a stake in the process. By embodying these traits, institutions remain robust, adaptive, and aligned with the evolving needs of society.

Youth Network Members' Policy Demands

In order to address the core problem, the ESDN Youth Network Members developed 3 policy demands that are **targeted at national level policymakers, politicians and national/European Youth councils**.

- 1) **Develop and implement educational initiatives to counter mistrust**
- 2) **Include Youth in the policy-making process**
- 3) **Organize an annual EU-level best practices conference**

- 1) **Develop and implement educational initiatives to counter mistrust**

Education is a key priority, as we must unite across countries and institutions to counter populist and extremist forces. Mistrust in institutions often stems from a lack of education. Therefore, we call for:

- The integration of EU Studies into school curricula.
- Continuously updating instructors' knowledge and skills on EU policies and environmental issues.
- Provide funding for these knowledge and skill trainings.

2) Include Youth in the policy-making process

Youth engagement and inclusion in the policy-making process is vital for the future of strong institutions, as the youth of today will be tomorrow's voters and leaders. Therefore, we call for:

- Every ministry to establish a youth contact point to address young people's concerns.
- Youth focal points to be appointed across themes to ensure that young people have a platform despite their inability to vote before the age of 16 or 18, which gives older generations a larger lobby.
- Ministries to exchange with their youth contact points through mandatory meetings.
- Ministries to provide a platform or interministerial youth group, where the

Example of institutional involvement of Youth in climate policymaking

Youth must be involved in the process for establishing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for 2030 within their respective country, for example.

Climate policies are made not only for the present, but most importantly for future generations, and as such, the Youth of today need to be involved.

different youth contact points from the different ministries can exchange with one another. This would be similar to how interministerial groups are formed

Create a platform to ensure dialogue between young people and government

The Action for Climate Empowerment Focal Points established by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is an example of such a platform.

Therefore, creating a similar platform of Youth Focal Points in the different national ministries is a way to ensure youth involvement in the workings of the ministries. This Focal Point would be a young person or a young civil servant, who everyone can contact regarding questions, concerns and ideas.

between government ministries on certain topics, such as sustainable development.

3) Organize an annual EU-level best practices conference

Best practices and collaboration are necessary for institutional development. Organizations should not be left to always reinvent the wheel but should learn from one another through exchanges. Therefore, we propose to:

- Organize an annual EU conference to share best practices across institutions, NGOs, and youth organizations.
- Foster and build trust between organizations that facilitates knowledge-sharing between them.
- Inform youth about the structures shaping their futures
- Align institutional operations with the goals of sustainable development and youth engagement.

Conclusion

Strong institutions are essential for fostering a resilient, inclusive society. By prioritizing youth engagement, educational reforms, and transparency, we can bridge the trust gap and empower future generations to play a meaningful role in shaping our collective future. The proposed actions aim to not only strengthen institutions but also to create a culture of shared responsibility and accountability, ensuring that institutions evolve with the needs and aspirations of the people they serve.