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# ESDN Youth Network Policy Note

**September 2026**

# Resilience 2.0: 5 Core Issues and Recommendations for a more Resilient Europe

## Introduction

In 2020 the European Sustainable Development Network established the ESDN Youth Network, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety.

Its yearly on-site event, the **ESDN Youth Workshop 2026**, took place on **12–15 August 2026** in Vienna at the Austrian Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management, brought together more than 42 UN Youth Delegates and National Representatives on Sustainable Development (SD) from 31 European countries to discuss issues most relevant to them.

The overarching theme of the Workshop was **"Resilience 2.0"** as described in the **2025 Strategic Foresight Report - European Commission**. Four of the eight areas of action mentioned in the report were dealt with in more detail according to a ranking carried out by the ESDN Youth Network:

- Supporting sustainable and inclusive well-being
- Strengthening democracy as a common good
- Developing a coherent global vision for the EU
- Strengthen long-term economic resilience

Over the four days of the Workshop, Youth Members heard input from experts on all of these topics and were given ample opportunity to discuss these topics and issues with one another.

The main goal of the Workshop, apart from providing a space for Youth Members to exchange ideas with one another, was to produce a policy document with recommendations on the topics covered throughout the Workshop. This was done by the Youth Members working in smaller groups on five different issues. The work they have done is reflected in the five policy notes that will be found below. The topics they worked on and provided policy recommendations for are as follows:

- **Core Issue 1: Reimagining education - coupling education reform with future-oriented labor market and social policies**
- **Core Issue 2: Strengthening democracy as a common good: countering polarization, supporting community building and safeguarding democratic standards**
- **Core Issue 3: Strengthening long-term economic resilience -increasing the ability to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth (circular economy and a resilient labor market)**
- **Core Issue 4: Developing a coherent global vision for Europe - asserting Europe's position as a strong, stable, and trusted worldwide partner, based on a clear strategic concept**
- **Core Issue 5: Sustainable and inclusive well-being**

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# Reimagining education - coupling education reform with future-oriented labor market and social policies

While recognizing that unequal access to quality education and persistent educational inequalities remain among Europe's most pressing challenges, this topic focuses specifically on reimagining what and how young people learn. Developed by youth representatives from across Europe, it does not question the importance of the foundational knowledge (traditional subjects like maths, languages, history and sciences), but proposes new ways of teaching it alongside civic, digital and practical skills needed for youth's present and future. The paper concludes with promising practices illustrating how this vision can be translated into action.

In a world of intense labor markets and rapidly changing technology, the only constant is change. We need to reshape our education systems to keep up with the pace. According to Eurostat, in 2026 15.5% of young people under the age of 25 are currently unemployed, which makes a total of 2.987 million young people struggling to enter the labor market (Eurostat, 2026). Ipsos, a global market research firm, writes: "Less than 1 in 2 young people considers themselves well prepared to enter the job market (48%)". With this data in mind, we are keen to propose structural changes within the education system as well as updates regarding the content of curricula.

Education must serve as a foundational pillar in preparing young people to navigate the uncertainty of tomorrow and recognize the value of civic engagement in their communities as a first step toward building robust, cohesive societies. The goal is a dynamic educational framework that not only adapts flexibly to global crises but actively empowers young people to become valuable contributors to resilient communities.

# Policy Recommendations

## Structural change

The conventional education system, prioritizing memorization over skill-building, is the root cause of the currently observed gap between job market reality and the state of knowledge of students, as emphasized at the WEF 2020. To address this issue and transition away from the outdated cycle, we propose foundational changes in teaching approaches, such as:

**Flipping the classroom**

- **Move away from top-down and frontal-centered methods** by "flipping the classroom." In this model, targeted and practiced at primary and secondary education, initial instruction and content absorption happen independently, while collaborative work, practical applications, and deep analysis happen during class. The benefits of this approach are manifold: they offer self-paced learning and student autonomy; they leave time in class for active engagement and ensure dedicated individual support.

- **Foster project-based learning:** As a core element of "flipping the classroom", project-based learning focuses on learning by doing, instead of theoretical learning inside a traditional classroom setting. This engages students more, and helps them develop soft skills, enhances team-work capacities, and encourages active citizenship, such as participation in student councils, civil organizations, and youth parliaments.

**Grading**

- **Innovate the grading system** to fight exam stress and effectively address the challenges posed by artificial intelligence.

- **Incorporate different methods of evaluation**, such as defending a thesis orally, rather than relying strictly on traditional grading systems and essay writing. This shift will inherently promote critical thinking, creativity, and the real-life application of knowledge, and combat plagiarism.

Ultimately, teaching competencies and skills, not just facts, makes education more resilient towards rapid innovation and the drastically changing demands of the labor market.

## Ideal curriculum proposal

- **Foster political education** through parliamentary simulations and concrete political projects with the goal of strengthening democracy and participation in political processes.
- **Promote social responsibility** on a local, but also on a global level, to teach solidarity and responsibility, and to create a sense of belonging for young people in their community.
- **Develop digital literacy** to understand the impact of new technologies on society while acquiring the digital skills required in the workplace.
- **Develop administrative and financial literacy** to manage budgets, accounting, investment, taxes, (health) insurance, residence permits, and contracts.
- **Support basic life skills** with a focus on domestic work, refurbishing and crafts, to help communities transition towards circular economies.
- **Foster entrepreneurship** through student initiatives, encouraging adaptive thinking, teamwork and problem-based learning.

By the end of the mandatory education track, students have developed resilience through skills in critical and adaptive thinking, as well as societal navigation. For the above-mentioned additions, we encourage the consultation of external, local organizations.

## Good Practice Cases

Throughout Europe, there are multiple examples of countries that have adapted their education curriculum to a more project-based learning approach with an emphasis on life skills and civic engagement. In order to build resilient communities across Europe, it is fundamental for governments to inculcate this approach through best practice examples and transition mechanisms from countries across Europe.

**Existing Practices**

- **Bulgarian Vocational Schools:** Bulgaria operates vocational training throughout their education system for young people. This encourages a work-based learning approach through apprenticeships and dual-track education.
- **Finland's Targeted Development Grants:** Finland's education system utilizes targeted development grants (often issued as discretionary government subsidies or "special grants") to address specific policy priorities, promote equity, and drive internationalization without altering the baseline core funding model.
- **Estonia's Tiigrihüpe (Tiger Leap) program:** Estonia's Tiigrihüpe policy was a pioneering 1996 national initiative launched to heavily invest in schools and prioritize IT literacy and internet access in all schools. It laid the foundational framework that transformed Estonia into a leading digital-first society.

**Transition Processes:**

- **Ireland's National Convention on Education**: Ireland has taken steps to reform its education system through a landmark initiative. The Convention brings together 150 members to debate core long-term strategies with its recommendations directly informing the Department of Education and Youth's upcoming strategic framework for decades to come.
- Ireland's New Solutions Innovation Fund: Led by state agency Pobal, and funded through the European Social Fund, the New Solutions Innovation Fund aims to enhance the social innovation ecosystem in Ireland. This allows the state to support and scale proven models delivered by organizations (many from an education field), and these 'new solutions' can influence policy and future practice.

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## Conclusion

The demands of the labor market are drastically changing through digitalization and technological breakthroughs like AI. In order to, on the one hand, match education with the rapidly changing needs of the labor market, and, on the other hand, strengthen communities and make them more resilient, education has to move from teaching facts to teaching competencies and skills through project-based learning. Civic education, digital and financial literacy, as well as political education should be taught with the ultimate goal of fostering critical and adaptive thinking skills, encouraging social responsibility and supporting students in navigating life as a whole.

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## Core Issue 2: Strengthening democracy as a common good: countering polarization, supporting community building and safeguarding democratic standards

Democracy is not a permanent or self-sustaining condition. Democratic institutions, public trust, and meaningful civic participation require continuous protection and renewal, particularly at a time when the digital transformation of public life has changed both how democracy is practiced and how it is contested. Across Europe, political debate has shifted decisively into digital spaces, creating new opportunities for participation and access to information, but also new vulnerabilities to manipulation, polarization, and disinformation. These pressures do not originate from a single source: they combine external interference, domestic political dynamics, and structural features of the digital environment itself.

This note argues that a resilient European democracy rests on three interdependent pillars: defending democratic institutions and public trust against threats from every direction, adapting the digital information environment so that it serves rather than undermines informed citizenship, and renewing democratic legitimacy by making young people genuine actors in political life rather than its passive subjects.

Democratic resilience, for the purposes of this document, can be understood as the capacity of a democratic system to absorb pressure, correct itself, and retain public legitimacy, without suspending the rights and freedoms it exists to protect. This capacity is now tested under conditions unlike those democracies faced a generation ago: algorithmic curation mediates much of what citizens see and believe; generative AI has sharply lowered the cost of producing convincing false content at scale; and foreign and domestic actors alike exploit the same digital mechanisms to deepen existing social divisions. Threats that were once treated separately (i.a. cyberattacks, disinformation, political extremism, institutional erosion) increasingly interact through a shared digital public sphere, making them harder to address in isolation. Responding to this requires a comprehensive approach that treats external interference and internal vulnerability as two facets of the same challenge, rather than as separate policy domains.

## Policy Recommendations: Protecting Democracy from Every Threat

External and internal threats are two faces of the same vulnerability. Foreign actors seeking to weaken European democracies typically do not invent new divisions; they exploit existing ones. Coordinated disinformation campaigns, political microtargeting, attacks on electoral infrastructure, and covert financial support for divisive political movements (increasingly grouped under the EU's own terminology of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)) and situated within the broader category of hybrid threats – aiming to deepen tensions that already exist within societies. Migration is sometimes instrumentalized within this landscape, with narratives around it amplified specifically to polarize rather than to inform. The underlying vulnerability, however, is domestic: rising populism, extremism, and declining institutional trust, which make societies more susceptible to these external efforts in the first place. A resilient democracy must therefore treat external attacks and internal vulnerabilities as a single problem, not two.

Digital discourse is the connective mechanism. The shift of political debate online accelerates both dynamics at once. Algorithmically amplified content turns disagreement into identity-based hostility rather than policy debate, echo chambers reduce exposure to opposing views, and online anonymity lowers the threshold for harassment. The consequence is a decline in the willingness to compromise, deepening distrust of institutions, and growing vulnerability to extremist narratives – the same conditions that make foreign interference more effective.

Institutional resilience and the limits of governance reform also have an impact. Beyond information-space measures, some proposals are put forward as possible safeguards against institutional capture and as tools for democratic renewal. One such measure could be a term limit for senior political office. Such proposals carry a genuine tension: they can support turnover and reduce entrenchment, but they also constrain the democratic mandate voters give to leaders they choose to re-elect. This note treats such governance measures as a legitimate subject for national debate *rather than* a recommendation to be applied uniformly, and any move in this direction should be weighed against its effect on voter choice as carefully as its effect on resilience.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Strengthen coordinated European responses to hybrid threats and FIMI**, including information-sharing between national authorities, the EU, the Council of Europe, and international partners, rather than relying on isolated national responses.
- **Support democratic institutions in other countries** – within and beyond the EU, including the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership states, and non-EU European countries – on the basis of partnership and technical cooperation, not political conditionality.
- **Agree on election-period rapid-response protocols between electoral authorities, platforms, and civil society** before campaigns begin, not during them.
- **Address the domestic drivers of vulnerability**, including declining institutional trust, political disengagement, and inadequate protections for journalists and civil society, with the same urgency as external threats.
- **Encourage open, evidence-based national debate on governance safeguards**, such as necessary prior training or education before assuming office or term limits for elected officials across the spectrum of local, regional, national and supranational levels, acknowledging the trade-offs between institutional renewal and a democratic mandate.

## Policy Recommendations: Democracies Need to Adapt to the Digital Age

Algorithms and the integrity of the information environment are important issues that also need to be addressed. Social media algorithms are generally optimized to maximize engagement, which means they tend to prioritize emotionally charged content and repeatedly expose users to material that reinforces their existing views. This does not merely reflect public opinion; it actively shapes it by determining what is amplified, repeated, and made visible. Generative AI compounds this problem: convincing false images, audio, and video can now be produced cheaply and at scale, used to misrepresent candidates, fabricate events, or cast doubt on facts and genuine evidence altogether. Treating algorithmic curation and AI-generated content as a single, connected challenge, rather than as separate "platform" and "AI" issues, better reflects how they positively reinforce each other in practice.

Factchecking, media literacy, and reliable media, therefore, need to act as complementary defenses. Factchecking establishes whether a specific claim is accurate, but it cannot keep pace with how quickly false narratives spread, nor can it substitute for citizens' own capacity to question sources and recognize manipulation. Media literacy is therefore a necessity. This extends to the health of the media environment itself: independent, adequately funded public media, transparent ownership structures, and clear information about the funding sources behind political content all shape whether citizens have reliable alternatives to algorithmically curated feeds in the first place. Weak public media and opaque content funding leave a vacuum that manipulation fills more easily.

Data, political advertising, and transparency also need to be considered. Detailed personal data allows political actors to target individuals with personalized messages invisible to the wider public, undermining the transparency that allows journalists, electoral authorities, and citizens to scrutinize campaigns. Clearer rules on political advertising, data use, and campaign funding are a necessary condition for meaningful public debate, not a peripheral technical concern.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Require meaningful transparency on recommender systems** with a readily accessible non-profiling feed option set as the default for minors.
- **Ensure clear labelling of AI-generated political content**, paired with platform-side provenance signals and rapid-response mechanisms during elections.
- **Fund and evaluate digital and media literacy programs** on the basis of evidence while prioritizing approaches shown to build resilience to manipulation, not only "spotting fake news."
- **Safeguard the independence and funding of public and local media** and require effective transparency on the financing of political content and advertising.
- **Establish clearer, enforceable rules on political micro-targeting and campaign data use** that is applicable across the European media and advertising space, and not only within EU borders.

## Policy Recommendations: Youth as the Guiding Force for Democracy

Youth should be seen as both targets and agents. Young people are not only affected by today's political, social, and digital decisions – they will live with their consequences the longest. Heavy exposure to online information makes them particular targets of manipulation and algorithmic influence, yet the same digital fluency also positions them as some of the most effective agents of democratic resilience, through digital literacy, factchecking, and youth-led civic initiatives. Treating young people only as a vulnerable group, without recognizing their agency, misses half the picture.

Participation of youth in democratic processes remains fragmented and symbolic. Despite this potential, youth involvement in democratic institutions is too often dependent on individual goodwill rather than embedded formal structures: consultations without binding follow-up, youth-led projects without a seat in actual decision-making, and participation mechanisms that are under-resourced compared to those available to experts and policymakers. Symbolic participation does not build trust but rather risks deepening disengagement.

Electoral and institutional access are also challenges facing youth participation in democracy. Several concrete measures could reduce these barriers: youth quotas or quorums in local and regional councils, with an obligation on political parties to include younger candidates; giving municipal youth councils a formal right to place proposals on the agenda of local councils; aligning the minimum age for candidacy with the minimum voting age, so that young people are not permitted to vote before they are permitted to stand; and simplifying voter registration to reduce the mis-registration that disproportionately affects first-time voters. Lowering the voting age to 16 is one option worth considering within this package; not primarily as a numerical expansion of the electorate, but as a way of forcing political debate to engage more directly with issues that matter to younger generations. Any such step, however, must be accompanied by a robust system of civic and democratic education from an early age; extending the franchise without preparing young people to meaningfully exercise it would risk symbolic inclusion rather than genuine participation.

Civic and digital-democratic education for youth is a must. Education for democratic resilience should go beyond identifying

misinformation to include an understanding of how algorithms shape political perception, how polarization develops, and how manipulation tactics operate – building directly on the literacy measures set out under the recommendations made above in democracies needing to adapt to the digital age, but oriented toward forming active democratic participants rather than solely defending against manipulation.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Establish binding, resourced consultation mechanisms for youth in democratic-resilience governance**, replacing advisory-only or project-based formats with structural, funded participation.
- **Introduce youth quotas in local and regional councils** and give municipal youth councils formal agenda-setting rights.
- **Align minimum candidacy age with minimum voting age** and simplify voter registration to reduce structural barriers facing first-time voters.
- **Explore lowering the voting age** as one option for engaging youth in political debate, conditional on parallel investment in civic education and not as a standalone measure.
- **Integrate civic and digital-democratic education across all levels of schooling**, evaluated on its measurable effect on civic engagement rather than left unevaluated indefinitely.

## Conclusion

Democracy in Europe faces no single threat that can be addressed in isolation. External interference and internal polarization reinforce one another through a shared digital public sphere; algorithmic curation and AI-generated content determine much of what citizens come to believe as true; and young people stand at the center of this environment, as both its most exposed targets and its most underused source of renewal. Treating these as three separate aspects – security, technology, and youth policy – has produced responses that are reactive, fragmented, and too often too narrow to match the scale of the challenge.

A more resilient European democracy requires the three pillars set out in this note to move together. Defending institutions against external and internal threats will not hold if the information environment continues to reward manipulation over accuracy. Adapting the digital environment will not restore public trust if young people remain locked out of genuine participation. Youth participation will also not be meaningful if it is not backed by both a trustworthy information space and institutions resilient enough to sustain it. Strengthening democracy in the digital era is not a matter of choosing which of these to prioritize, but of recognizing that none of them can succeed without the others.

## Core Issue 3: Strengthening long-term economic resilience - increasing the ability to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth (circular economy and a resilient labor market)

Economic resilience, in times of disruption arising from transition stress, whether driven by decarbonization, technological change, AI, or geopolitical supply shocks, is becoming a key priority for European policymaking. The actions proposed in the following section focus on two areas that are particularly important for building long-term economic resilience.

Firstly, pursuing circular economy principles cand help reduce Europe's dependence on primary materials, in general, by using what is already in existence within Europe by recycling materials, using them longer, and finding other uses for materials that would otherwise be discarded, which can strengthen economic resilience by reducing Europe's dependence on resources from outside its borders, and thereby minimize its exposure to supply disruptions and vulnerability to volatile global markets.

Fast fashion, for example, is particularly (but not exclusively) relevant to young people due to its connection to identity and self-expression. While shifting from fast fashion to second-hand clothing is a step in the right direction, it does not necessarily reduce overall consumption. Building greater resilience therefore also requires changing consumption patterns and enabling young people to contribute through more conscious and resource-efficient purchasing habits.

Secondly, labor market resilience in the face of the growing impact of AI and robotics on economic restructuring and the potential displacement of jobs in certain sectors is also an important aspect to consider. A resilient economy requires a workforce that can adapt to technological change, acquire new skills, and transition into emerging areas of employment. This is particularly relevant for young people who are entering a labor market increasingly shaped by AI and automation.

Resilience 2.0 treats resilience as a supply-side project: secure the supply chains, the critical resources, the key industries. That is procurement, not resilience. It says nothing about what a society can produce without importing, who owns it, and whether people can move when their work changes, and those questions decide which generation pays for a transition, and which one collects the return.

## Policy Recommendations: Circular Economy

Circular economy is where that gap is most concrete. Europe imports close to 100% of its heavy rare earth elements from one dominant supplier and recycles under 1% of them, while the value it already owns sits untapped: unrepaired clothing, unrecycled electronics, filters and packaging built to be thrown away once. Fast fashion is the clearest illustration. Cheap, short-lived garments are a resource strategy, and every one that is not repaired is a resource Europe re-imports to replace. The EU's circular material use rate stands at 12.2%, against a 2030 target of 24%. Repairability laws, deposit systems and durability disclosure already exist in some European countries; what is missing is the political will to generalize them.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Make the labor cost of repair tax-deductible.** Allow consumers to deduct the labor cost of repairing clothing, appliances, electronics and bicycles from taxable income up to an annual ceiling. Repair loses to replacement on labor cost; unlike a voucher scheme, a deduction reaches every repairer automatically and cannot run out mid-year.
- **Obligate producers to repair their own garments** at a price capped at 30% of the original retail price. For five years after purchase, the producer, not the retailer, must repair common damage for no more than 30% of the original retail price, or refund. Because the cap is a share of

the price the producer itself sets, cheap garments that fail become losses while durable garments cost nothing. The Right to Repair Directive, which obliges repair "at a reasonable price" never defines a reasonable price, and it also excludes clothing.

- **Date every garment** and put reviews of that brand's products in the digital product passport. This can be done by putting the production year on each garment, so consumers can see when it was made and how long it lasted. Let the QR code in the garment open reviews of that product category from that brand, so quality is visible before buying rather than discovered afterwards both for firsthand and especially second-hand buyers.
- **Replace the flat two-year guarantee** with category-specific minimum periods that rise with the market and are recalculated every three years as the volume-weighted average of guarantees actually offered — a floor most of the market already meets, which rises whenever any brand extends its own. Display it next to the price.
- **Introduce a deposit on reusable takeaway packaging**, returnable anywhere in the city at automated return points rather than only at the outlet that sold it, mandatory above a size threshold. Deposits recover 90–98% of containers wherever they operate.
- **Ban advertising for high-carbon products in publicly owned and licensed space** by restricting advertising for meat, aviation, cruises and fossil-fuel vehicles on publicly owned and licensed space — transport hubs, street furniture, municipal media — phased in as contracts fall due. A state that funds climate policy while renting bus shelters to advertise long-haul flights is cancelling itself out.
- **Ban plastic cigarette filters and single-use e-cigarettes**, since filters are 21% of all single-use plastics on European beaches and deliver no health benefit; single-use vapes bin lithium Europe is spending public money to secure. Policy window: the Single-Use Plastics Directive, whose review falls due by 3 July 2027, and the revision of the Tobacco Products Directive.
- **Implement policies and strategies that strengthen the reduce, reuse and recycle mindset**, as countries can significantly influence young people's purchasing habits and help break the harmful cycle of overconsumption driven by low-quality products.

**Real world examples:**

- **Sweden's Renovering, Ombyggnad, Tillbyggnad** (Renovation, Remodeling, Extension) **and Rengöring, Underhåll, Tvätt** (Cleaning, Maintenance, Laundry) **deductions** cover 30–50% of labor costs for repair and maintenance work
- **Vienna's Repair Bonus** (*Wiener Reparaturbon*) is still working out the most sustainable form, but it demonstrates that governments are already willing to directly subsidize repair labor to make repair economically competitive with replacement.
- Commercially it is proven at scale: Nudie Jeans (Sweden) repairs its jeans free for life, and Decathlon (France) runs in-house repair services across its stores.
- EPREL, the EU's own energy labelling register, already works the way we propose: a QR code on the product label opens a public database, with a separate closed area for market surveillance authorities.
- France grades products with a mandatory repairability index
- Denmark, Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands have already abandoned the flat two-year rule and apply an "expected lifetime" standard instead.
- Aarhus became the first city in the world to put a deposit on takeaway coffee cups, refunded automatically to the customer's

card at 25 return machines. First year: over 750,000 cups returned, an 85% return rate, 84% user satisfaction, and the most-circulated cups completing 33 reuse loops.

- France became the first European country to ban fossil fuel advertising, and Amsterdam is the first capital city to ban advertising in public space for both fossil-fuel products and meat, covering beef, pork, chicken, fish, airlines, cruises, petrol and diesel cars and long-haul travel
- The World Health Organization calls on policymakers to treat cigarette filters as single-use plastics and to consider banning them (Tobacco: Poisoning our planet, 2022).
- On single-use vapes, the precedent is already established. Belgium became the first EU country to ban them.

## Policy Recommendations: Labour markets & AI

Secure autonomy is the same argument applied to people. A supply chain can be resilient and still leave workers with no stake in the industries reshaping their jobs, which is exactly where the AI transition stands now: nearly a quarter of European employment sits in occupations highly exposed to AI-enabled automation. EU law already guarantees citizens a vote in energy infrastructure through energy communities; nothing equivalent exists for AI. That gap is a resilience failure in the same sense as import dependence: it leaves Europe's capacity to adapt in someone else's hands.

Both land hardest on young people, who hold the fewest assets, the least job security, and the least say over how either transition gets designed. Youth unemployment stands at 15.5%, and young workers in AI-exposed jobs are already seeing employment fall well below where it should be, with no comparable gap among experienced workers. Circular economy and secure autonomy are two places Europe can build the pathways Resilience 2.0 currently lacks.

**Problem statement:**

How can Europe prepare young people for labor markets transformed by AI and advanced robotics, while ensuring that access to new opportunities, skills and productivity gains is distributed fairly across workers, communities and regions?

Europe risks leaving a generation behind: almost 3 million young people are unemployed in the EU, while one in four workers globally is already in an occupation exposed to generative AI. As AI and advanced robotics transform both cognitive and physical work, employer projections suggest that structural labor-market change could affect up to 22% of current jobs by 2030, according to the World Economic Forum. In addition, only 74% of EU residents aged 16 to 24 had at least basic digital skills, meaning that approximately one in four young people did not reach even this threshold.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Equip young people with future-relevant, adaptable skills**
- **Ensure employment opportunities and productivity gains are shared fairly** rather than concentrated among a small group of technology owners.

As AI tools have become more capable of performing tasks traditionally assigned to juniors, youth employment in AI-exposed occupations stands 19% lower than in less exposed sectors.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Complement young professionals** through a quota system that sets a minimum ratio of junior employees relative to a company's headcount.

**Real world examples:**

- France has operated a version of such a mechanism since 2015 through its *contribution supplémentaire à l'apprentissage* (CSA): companies with 250+ employees whose share of apprentices and work-study contracts falls below 5% of their workforce pay a progressive financial penalty.

Translating such a model in the EU context would help guarantee that firms continue to invest in entry-level talent, as they turn into the next generations of senior talent. This is not only a matter of fairness in the short term, but a long-term investment: a generation that is locked out of skilled, engaged work now will leave a lasting gap in Europe's future workforce.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Support young people who need to change careers** as their occupations change. A graphic designer whose role is increasingly automated, for example, should be able to access resources like an upskilling scholarship. Such a fund would allow them to learn essential skills for Europe's net-zero, circular economy.
- **Regulate AI so that it plays a role in preserving the value of junior work**. Certain tasks should remain subject to mandatory human control and sign-off, not only for safety or quality reasons. Keeping this human element in these systems is vital to make sure that trust in institutions and societies remains strong. Graphic design is one example: output generated or assisted by AI should still require human approval and involvement to make sure that the human touch that we base so much trust on remains.
- **Subsidize junior positions directly** at companies of all sizes but with a particular focus on SMEs. These subsidized roles, which could take the form of graduate programs, should be designed around the notion that the companies teach their employees to work with AI. In this way, Europe will maintain a young workforce that is highly skilled and in control of AI instead of being victims of this technological revolution.

## Core Issue 4: Developing a coherent global vision for Europe - asserting Europe's position as a strong, stable, and trusted worldwide partner, based on a clear strategic concept

Europe is at a crossroads of its own making. For decades, Europe could claim — often with good reason — a form of moral high ground: democracy, human rights, environmental ambition, social protection, solidarity and rule-based governance. These are not secondary features of the European project. They are written into its treaties and have shaped the way Europe presents itself to the world.

The difficulty is that Europe increasingly struggles to live up to the model it has spent decades promoting. Power politics has returned, economic dependencies have become geopolitical leverage, and Europe is being tested not only by systemic rivals but also by partners and allies whose interests do not always coincide with its own. At home, slower productivity growth, high energy costs, demographic pressure and an investment gap estimated by the Draghi Report at €750–800 billion per year have turned competitiveness into an existential question.

This exposes an uncomfortable contradiction: Europe fears that defending its standards will make it less competitive yet compromising them has not necessarily made it more powerful.

The transatlantic tariff settlement made this tension visible. Faced with US pressure, Europe prioritized predictability and de-escalation, accepting a 15% tariff ceiling on most EU exports while removing remaining tariffs on US industrial goods, even if safeguards were later added. The episode raises a broader question: how willing is Europe to use the economic weight of its Single Market when pressure comes from an ally?

The same dilemma exists at home. Europe does need to simplify. Fragmentation and regulatory complexity impose real costs on businesses and weaken the Single Market. However, simplification can easily blur into retreat when substantive standards are weakened in the name of competitiveness. Cutting unnecessary bureaucracy is sensible. Competing by progressively lowering the standards Europe once presented as a strength is not. Otherwise, Europe risks becoming less distinctive without becoming more competitive.

Meanwhile, strategic dependencies remain acute. Europe still relies overwhelmingly on China for several critical raw materials. The lesson from Russia should be clear: dependencies that look efficient in normal times can become strategic liabilities overnight.

On the other hand, Russia also proved that Europe could act. After the invasion of Ukraine, the EU rapidly reduced its dependence on Russian gas and moved towards a legally binding phase-out. That adjustment came at a significant cost: the energy crisis exposed European consumers and businesses to sharply higher prices, while some countries temporarily increased coal use to secure supply. In addition, it also laid bare the risks of excessive dependence and reinforced the case for diversifying supply, accelerating renewables and strengthening Europe's own energy resilience. When urgency, political will and solidarity align, dependencies once treated as unavoidable can be broken remarkably quickly.

This is the resilience Europe now needs: not the absence of costs or difficult trade-offs, but the capacity to absorb them and adapt. Not self-sufficiency and not isolation. Strategic autonomy should mean retaining enough economic, industrial, technological, energy and political capacity to make our own choices — and enough resilience to withstand the consequences when others dislike them.

Europe does not lack power. It has the economic scale of its Single Market, regulatory influence, technological capabilities, trade leverage and strong alliances. What it too often lacks is the willingness, cohesion and institutional capacity to use these assets strategically.

Europe has teeth. It is simply too often reluctant to bite.

The question is, therefore, not whether Europe possesses power, but whether it has organized itself to use it.

A coherent global vision should begin with one objective: preserving Europe's capacity to make its own choices. That freedom of action rests on five mutually reinforcing foundations: economic scale, strategic diversification, institutional capacity, credible values and democratic legitimacy.

## Policy Recommendations: Economic Scale - Turning the Single Market into European Power

Europe's ability to act globally begins with its ability to function internally. The Single Market should no longer be understood only as an economic achievement. In a world increasingly shaped by continental powers, it is also strategic infrastructure for European power.

Yet its scale remains partly theoretical. Companies operating across the Union still face different administrative processes, reporting systems, registration requirements and interpretations of common rules. These costs are particularly damaging for SMEs and scale-ups.

Europe cannot expect its companies to scale globally if it does not allow them to scale continentally.

Streamlining should therefore become a core component of European competitiveness. However, simplification must not become a synonym for deregulation. High environmental, social, safety and consumer standards can provide certainty and a level playing field. The real target should be duplication, inconsistency and unnecessary procedure.

The guiding principle should be simple: regulate once, comply once, report once.

Information already lawfully held by public authorities should not repeatedly be requested. Mutual recognition should be the default where equivalent requirements have been met. Cross-border procedures should increasingly be digital and interoperable.

At the same time, deeper integration should not mean harmonization for its own sake. European action should focus on areas where fragmentation creates clear costs, prevents companies from reaching scale or weakens resilience — particularly in services, capital, energy and digital markets.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Make "regulate once, comply once, report once"** a guiding principle of Single Market policy, removing duplicative requirements and expanding interoperable digital procedures.
- **Prioritize integration where fragmentation prevents European scale**, especially in services, capital, energy and digital markets.
- **Simplify without deregulating**, targeting administrative burden while protecting substantive environmental, social, labor, safety and consumer standards.

A coherent global Europe cannot be built on a fragmented economic foundation.

## Policy Recommendations: Strategic Diversification - Interdependence without dependency

Strategic autonomy should not mean retreating from the world. Europe cannot — and should not — produce everything itself.

The objective should instead be to move from passive dependence to managed interdependence: remaining open while ensuring that no single external actor acquires disproportionate leverage over European choices.

Diversification, therefore, means more partnerships, not fewer.

Europe should broaden its economic and strategic relationships across Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Indo-Pacific without simply replacing one dominant supplier with another. Resilience comes from alternatives.

However, these partnerships must also be genuinely reciprocal. Relationships designed primarily to secure European resources or markets will not be politically sustainable. European resilience should create value for partner countries through local processing, infrastructure, skills, technology cooperation and employment.

This also requires accepting that partners have their own interests. Europe should seek cooperation rather than expecting political alignment on every issue.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Identify and reduce excessive strategic dependencies** before crises occur, using sector-specific diversification strategies and contingency planning.
- **Build partnerships around shared value creation**, ensuring that European access to resources and markets also strengthens local economic capacity in partner countries.
- **Develop a broad portfolio of trusted relationships** without creating new dependencies, because an important partner should never become an irreplaceable one.

Strategic autonomy should mean the freedom to remain open without becoming vulnerable to coercion.

## Policy Recommendations: Institutional Capacity - Building a Union able to act

Economic scale and diversified partnerships are of limited value if the Union cannot translate them into timely political decisions.

Unanimity in foreign policy exists for understandable reasons. Foreign policy touches the core of national sovereignty, and consensus strengthens the legitimacy of common action.

However, consensus and unanimity are not the same thing.

A political system should seek consensus. It does not necessarily need to give every participant a permanent legal veto over every decision.

This matters particularly in foreign policy, where timing is often part of substance. A response delivered months after an event can have a fundamentally different impact from one delivered when the event occurs.

This does not justify moving all foreign policy to qualified majority voting. Instead, the EU should explore differentiated decision-making, matching the decision rule to the sovereignty implications of the decision concerned.

Military and defense decisions should continue to require unanimity. Conversely, there may be areas — such as certain sanction decisions, human rights positions, implementation of previously agreed strategies or civilian measures — where the costs of repeated paralysis outweigh the additional legitimacy created by unanimity.

We deliberately do not establish an exhaustive catalogue in this policy note. Such a distinction requires detailed legal and political analysis, and we stand ready to develop it further. Our purpose is to advance the principle: Europe should examine where unanimity genuinely protects essential national interests and where it primarily makes collective action vulnerable to blockage.

Existing treaties already provide some flexibility, including constructive abstention, specific cases of qualified majority voting and the possibility of extending QMV to additional CFSP areas through the Passerelle Mechanism, itself requiring unanimous agreement.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Review CFSP decision-making systematically**, identifying where unanimity remains indispensable and where QMV could improve effectiveness.

- **make fuller use of existing Treaty flexibility**, including constructive abstention and existing QMV provisions.
- **Preserve a culture of consensus without creating a culture of veto**, recognizing that the possibility of a vote can strengthen incentives for compromise.

Institutional reform must also be accompanied by stronger coordination between the Council, Commission, EEAS and High Representative. A Union that decides faster but acts incoherently will still fall short of strategic capacity.

## Policy Recommendations: Credible Values - Power without losing purpose

The ability to act is not enough. Europe must also be clear about what its power is for.

Realism is indispensable in a more confrontational geopolitical environment. However, realism cannot mean treating democracy, human rights, international law and multilateralism as principles that matter only when defending them is cost-free.

European values should be strategic anchors rather than convenient rhetoric.

Selective application weakens European credibility and the rules-based order on which the Union itself depends. The same principle applies internally: Europe cannot credibly demand respect for democracy and the rule of law abroad while ignoring serious breaches at home.

Article 7 TEU has a specific role here. It should not be used to overcome ordinary political disagreement, but it should be applied consistently where the legal conditions concerning serious threats or breaches of the Union's foundational values are fulfilled.

Nor should a values-based foreign policy mean subordinating every external instrument to geopolitical calculation. Development cooperation, support for effective multilateralism and principled humanitarian action remain part of the distinctive role Europe seeks to play internationally.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Develop a more coherent foreign-policy framework**, better connecting diplomacy, security, trade, development and economic security.
- **Apply European principles more consistently at home and abroad**, including the rule of law within the Union and international law in relations with both allies and adversaries.
- **Remain a strong supporter of effective multilateralism**, sustainable development and humanitarian action, by playing a lead role in supporting the UN80 initiative and ensuring that the Special Representatives of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, Violence against Children, and Sexual Violence in Conflict receive an adequate amount of funding to remain viable and execute their duties effectively.

Values without capacity risk becoming rhetoric. Capacity without values leaves Europe with power but no distinctive purpose.

## Policy Recommendations: Democratic Legitimacy - Resilience Begins at Home

Europe's freedom to act ultimately depends on whether its citizens consider European cooperation worth sustaining.

The current picture is more complex than a simple rise in Euroscepticism. Trust in the EU and identification with European citizenship remain significant, even as Eurosceptic and radical political forces have gained ground across several Member States.

These realities are not contradictory. Political disaffection is unevenly distributed and tends to deepen where citizens perceive the costs of integration more clearly than its benefits, or where European institutions seem distant from the problems dominating everyday life.

European identity, therefore, cannot be built through communication alone.

Communication matters, particularly when citizens do not recognize the role European

action plays in mobility, infrastructure, consumer rights, energy security or employment. However, policies that do not improve lived experience will not become credible simply because they are explained better.

European identity must be supported by both a shared narrative and a shared experience. Solidarity is central to that experience.

The Ceuta crises illustrate the challenge. In both 2021 and 2026, European institutions expressed support for Spain and recognized the shared nature of the EU's external borders. Yet national reactions were not always equally aligned, revealing how formal European solidarity can coexist with domestic political reflexes pulling in the opposite direction.

Common European rules are only as resilient as the willingness of Member States to uphold them when political pressure rises.

Internal divisions also create vulnerabilities to external manipulation. Foreign actors do not need to invent European tensions if they can exploit existing ones.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Put citizens' lived experiences at the center of policymaking**, connecting European action more clearly to affordability, opportunity, mobility, security and quality of life.
- **Make solidarity more predictable** and European benefits more visible, replacing improvised responses with clearer shared responsibilities.
- **Invest in democratic resilience and European identity** through civic education, exchanges, youth participation, media literacy and stronger resilience to foreign information manipulation.

A European identity should not replace national identities. Its strength lies in allowing them to coexist within a wider political community. Nor should it require citizens to believe that the Union is always right. A resilient political community is one in which criticism of European institutions can coexist with a sense of belonging to Europe itself.

## Conclusion: Freedom of Action as European Power

A coherent global vision for the EU requires more than a foreign-policy strategy. It requires a theory of European power.

That power should ultimately be measured by freedom of action: the ability to cooperate by choice rather than dependence, to respond before the moment for action has passed, to defend principles when doing so carries a cost and to retain democratic support while doing so.

Five foundations make that possible: economic scale, strategic diversification, institutional capacity, credible values and democratic legitimacy. None is sufficient alone.

A fragmented Single Market cannot generate Europe's full strategic weight. Diversification without reciprocity creates new dependencies. Institutional capacity without legitimacy risks alienating citizens and Member States. Values without power become rhetoric; power without values loses its purpose.

The objective is, therefore, not maximum autonomy, maximum centralization or maximum regulatory ambition. It is European freedom of action.

Simplification should not mean abandoning ambition. Integration should not mean centralizing every decision. Qualified majority voting should not mean abolishing national sovereignty. Strategic partnerships should not mean creating new dependencies, and realism should not require Europe to abandon the principles that distinguish it.

Europe should no longer be satisfied with claiming the moral high ground.

It must build the economic depth, strategic resilience, institutional agility, political credibility and public trust required to stand its ground.

## Core Issue 5: Sustainable and inclusive well-being

One key challenge today is how to ensure sustainable and inclusive well-being while also advancing the green transition. Healthy societies underpin sustainable growth: access to public services, preventative healthcare, fair work, and inclusive green mobility are fundamental pillars of a future for all. Divided into four subtopics, this policy note addresses current challenges in these four areas and proposes policy avenues of action.

## Policy Recommendations: Access to public services

Equal, easy, and full access to public services - including but not limited to healthcare, public transport, education, cultural activities, public libraries, affordable housing, public spaces, the judicial system, and social services - is essential to well-being. Currently, several barriers continue to impede accessibility, disproportionately affecting youth and other vulnerable groups.

Cost constitutes a major barrier to access. This is especially concerning in the sector of healthcare, where 30% of young people in the European Union report difficulty in affording psychological or psychiatric services and the gap in quality between cost-inaccessible private healthcare and affordable public healthcare continues to widen. Furthermore, a study in the United Kingdom found that young people frequently have to forgo work or educational opportunities due to the cost of transport and make 21% fewer trips than working-age adults. Accessibility for people with disabilities also continues to pose a major challenge across all public services, driven by physical inaccessibility, such as step-only access, and a lack of proper support, such as sign language translators or neurodivergent-friendly processes. The continued segregation of youth with disabilities into special schools is especially concerning, demonstrably leading to less favorable long-term outcomes. Geographic inaccessibility of services in rural and underserved communities, excessive waiting times - frequently over a year for specialist medical appointments across European countries -, limited opening hours, language barriers due to lack of interpreting services, and discrimination against service-users belonging to marginalized groups present further obstacles. At the same time, certain services, such as public transport, housing, and public spaces, are increasingly suffering from the influx of mass tourism. Finally, in an ever-more-complicated web of services and service providers, inaccessibility of clear and comprehensive information, administrative burden in accessing services, and excessive digitalization of services - particularly the reduction of human contact points in favor of digital-only tools and AI agents - further hinder access.

The root cause of these barriers lies in inefficient procedures, excessive bureaucratic hurdles, lack of effective communication channels, and - above all - continuous political under-prioritization of public services and excessive budget cuts.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Provide free or heavily reduced transport tickets and culture vouchers to cost-vulnerable local residents**, including students and low-earners regardless of age.
- **Provide vouchers for free access to private medical care** to individuals who face harmful waiting times or have demonstrably been unable to obtain adequate care leading to symptom resolution in the public healthcare system.
- **Create more free community spaces** where community members of all ages can gather without the need to spend money and ensure they are safe spaces for all.
- **Ensure that there is a human contact point** who can be easily reached for every service, even where digital options are available.
- **Develop centralized information portals** on which comprehensive information on

all public services, across service providers, is available or linked.

- **Create easily accessible, walk-in info points** which offer information on public services and assistance with administrative procedures required for access to services.
- **Provide information in multiple languages** and offer free interpretation services to those who need them.
- **Expand transport connections** and shorten intervals in rural areas.
- **Prioritize disability access in budgets** and set mandatory deadlines for public services to make the necessary physical and digital amendments (e.g. lifts or ramps, plain text and screen-readable websites) to comply with modern accessibility standards.
- **Work with experts and advocacy groups** to create accommodations for neurodivergent individuals, such as sensory accommodations and diverse communication options.

## Policy Recommendations: Climate

The current climate crisis is putting additional stress on human well-being . Especially as infrastructural, economical, and industrial changes are made it is necessary to ensure equal possibilities to all citizens without discrimination. Thus, just transition is an equally important part of citizen well-being to build up both citizen and structural resilience against effects that can be brought by climate change or is unsystematic against it that has a dire effect on more vulnerable groups.

**Transportation**

In the transport sector, inclusive spatial and mobility planning and long-term development is crucial for ensuring just transition everywhere in Europe, especially in coordinating transportation options and making them accessible in regions and to lower income households in a sustainable way.

One example is car-sharing integration in Belgium with such options in cities and on the countryside with stops located at public places and limiting car movement inside of cities, more focusing on bike and public transportation options in them.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Ensure that in carbon emission minimization** the transportation options are available for lower income households and regions with infrastructural changes that align with EU sustainability goals while not putting additional financial stress on them.
- **Develop and deploy car-sharing options in cities**, along with more bike lanes, especially in the countryside with accessible carsharing stops that are located near public transportation, railway stations, and bus stops.

**Taxes**

The tax system is important in redistribution of wealth in a fair manner that aims to tackle climate change and ensure that EU climate neutrality goals are reached. It is integral in a just transition and it is the best tool to strategically affect EU resilience against risks in climate and food sectors.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Introduce a European kerosene tax** with higher rates targeting private jets, the revenue of which should be reinvested in support of climate-friendly living measure integration with special focus on helping more vulnerable groups affected by climate change.
- **Ensure a just transition for workers and small businesses** through a more progressive tax system that supports climate-friendly practices in smaller businesses by integrating benefits for them and higher taxes on high-income and high-wealth businesses.
- **Lower taxes on locally sourced high protein production** that could substitute meat and unsustainable practices in livestock farming.

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# Policy Recommendations: Health

There will be an estimated shortage of 4.1 million healthcare workers in the EU by 2030, many of who are overworked and underpaid. An aging demographic in the EU heightens the health crisis as the need for treatment increases over a longer time period with a reduced workforce. The median age is 45 in the EU, and by 2050 30% of Europe's population will be 65 or older. Life expectancies are also increasing. There is also chronic Underinvestment in healthcare sector, education and infrastructure. Healthcare spending on prevention is only 3% of total health expenditure across EU Member States. Environmental and Climate change impacts will increase healthcare costs and burden, disproportionally affecting the disadvantaged. Without increased investments, Europe's annual climate-related health costs could exceed €400 billion, alongside 30,000–80,000 additional heat-related deaths each year. Traditional capitalist and growth- centered economic models fail to improve societal wellbeing. We need to shift toward a well-being economy. This will address inequalities, measure the impacts of well-being policies with strategic KPI's, and prioritize investment that provides the greatest social value.

The environmental footprint of the health sector is estimated at 1–5% of the total global impact. Investments in the health sector have positive spillover effects on economic well-being. The health sector is more than an add-on to economic models: its expertise is essential to delivering equitable economies and promote well-being for all.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

**Workforce & Capacity**

- **Strengthen the health workforce through adequate human resource planning** and increased staffing, backed by a real living wage.
- **Invest in preparedness education** so healthcare staff are equipped for current and emerging health challenges.
- **Support research and development**, including advanced medical equipment and innovation.

**Access & Primary Care**

- **Expand primary care investment** in immunization and screening programs.
- **Shift health infrastructure toward preventative care** rather than reactive treatment.
- **Improve rural access to healthcare services** so geography is no longer a barrier to care.
- **Promote youth-friendly health services** that are accessible and responsive to young people's needs.
- **Guarantee universal direct-access mental health services** so no referral stands between people and support.
- **Strengthen diagnosis and care for under-recognized conditions** ("mystery symptoms") and chronic illnesses that disproportionately affect women.

**Digital Transformation**

- **Deploy efficient digital health systems**, including automation and telemedicine.
- **Digitalize therapy services to extend mental health support** beyond traditional settings.

**Prevention & Nutrition**

- **Improve nutrition accessibility**, countering steep declines (over 50% in some minerals over 80 years) in food quality.
- **Tax ultra-processed and unhealthy foods** to reshape consumption patterns.
- **Strengthen education on diet and nutrition** so citizens can make informed health choices.

**Information & Empowerment**

- **Combat health misinformation** through coordinated public communication.

- **Scale peer-to-peer health literacy programs** that build trust and reach people where they are.
- **Advance comprehensive SRHR** (sexual and reproductive health and rights) services and education.

**Climate, Environment & Health**

- **Integrate green infrastructure into hospitals and society at large** — spatial planning for health, eco-landscaping, and renewable energy.
- **Scale holistic medical treatment that delivers health and climate outcomes** together, e.g., nature-based social prescribing such as community gardening.
- **Improve active travel infrastructure** to make walking and cycling the easy choice.
- **Increase the supply of quality housing** as a foundation of public health.
- **Address climate stress and eco-anxiety**, particularly among young people, through dedicated mental health support.

## Policy Recommendations: Care Work

Despite more women being in the workforce, they are still expected to carry most of the housework and unpaid care responsibilities. This unequal share limits women's access to full-time employment, career progression, and the experience needed to reach well-paid jobs. It also causes depletion through social reproduction: more time spent on unpaid work means less time and energy to organize in unions or take part in decision-making. In cases of GBV, this dynamic reinforces the violence, since lack of access to decent work keeps women economically dependent on the perpetrator. Young women face a particular double problem: they are at the career-formation stage, when experience and "extra hours" matter most for progression - but this is also when they are most likely to take on care of younger siblings, elderly relatives, or early motherhood, pulling them out of the experience curve at the most critical moment.

**Therefore, we recommend to:**

- **Increase public and affordable childcare infrastructure** with hours compatible with full-time work.
- **Give pension credits** for years spent on care work, so today's depletion doesn't turn into poverty later. This exists in the UK for example but is currently very limited - extending it with a stronger gender lens would recognize the years women disproportionately spend on unpaid care.
- **Establish job re-entry programs** for women who left the workforce for care duties, recognizing those skills (management, logistics, negotiation) as transferable experience. Similar to disability-inclusion schemes (UK): at minimum, guarantee an interview so women get the chance to actually show these skills and list them on their CV.
- **Foster programs that give priority access** to training and employment for GBV survivors, breaking the link between economic dependence and staying in the violence.