

ESDN Youth Network Policy Note

September 2026

Resilience 2.0: Sustainable and inclusive well-being

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. This Policy Note focuses on Core Issue 5. The other Policy Notes are available separately, as well as in one complete document.

- **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**

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.

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, disproportionately 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.