



NextGenerationEU must involve all stakeholders! So far, it has not.

The NextGenerationEU instrument was announced last year as the biggest single investment of the European Union, mounting up to 750 billion euros, with the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) as its central instrument. The approval of NextGenerationEU promises to be a part of the greater plan to build green and digital societies while also recovering from the crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. We welcome the fact that youth and education feature among the priorities of the RRF under the pillar policies for the next generation. However, this aim will not be achieved without the engagement of relevant stakeholders, as they represent the constituencies that will be affected by the transformations promoted by the plan, making their involvement crucial in terms of democratic representation and effective implementation of the policies.

Our members and partners - mainly civil society organisations operating in the field of youth and education - highlighted their systematic exclusion from the consultation phase of the NRRPs. Either caused by a collateral lack of transparency or deliberate lack of involvement, many civil society organisations did not have an opportunity to contribute to the NRRPs and steer them towards the needs and priorities of their constituents. This is also elaborated on further in the commentary section of the statement with concrete national examples.

This is not only in direct contrast with the provisions of the Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility¹, which the European Commission must uphold during the evaluation phase of the National Plans; it is also a threat to the quality of our democracies and to the effectiveness in addressing the needs of our societies. To build trust with the new generation and empower them to be active citizens of the EU, the status quo cannot continue in the upcoming phases. Thus, we hereby strongly condemn the practices that many national authorities used to draft their NRRPs, and we underline the importance of meaningful engagement with all

¹ Article 18, point 4, letter q) of the Regulation: “for the preparation and, where available, for the implementation of the recovery and resilience plan, a summary of the consultation process, conducted in accordance with the national legal framework, of local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organisations, youth organisations and other relevant stakeholders, and how the input of the stakeholders is reflected in the recovery and resilience plan”.

stakeholders during the rest of the process to ensure previous negligence will not appear again.

We therefore call the European Commission to:

- thoroughly assess the way in which the Member States involved stakeholders, such as student and youth organisations, as well as educational and training providers and civil society organisations active in lifelong learning, in determining the allocation of funds and the proposed priorities regarding education and youth sectors, as requested by the Regulation establishing the RRF, publish a separate report on the involvement of the civil society organisations by the Member States during this phase and, if found to be non compliant with the Regulation, to take relevant action on this matter;
- properly address the degree to which the NRRPs fulfill the European Regulation's expectations in regard to supporting the "children and youth, including education and skills" pillar, especially in relation with the European Semester Recommendations;
- involve European stakeholders in evaluating the way in which civil society organisations were able to contribute to the NRRPs and in the way they are involved as relevant stakeholders in the implementation phase.

We furthermore call the national governments of the Member States of the European Union which did not consult student, youth and civil society organisations to reorient their practices and meaningfully involve these categories and their representatives in the implementation phase of the NRRPs, ensuring the activities laid out therein meet their needs.

Student and youth organisations, and educational and training providers and the wider civil society organisations are key in ensuring an equitable and effective recovery: our organisations will keep monitoring the EU and national measures for the NextGenerationEU, ensuring that the measures implemented will meet our constituents' needs and benefit them, while also working towards their participation, as well as of their representative organisations, in the implementation of the NRRPs.

COMMENTARY

As highlighted in a report by Civil Society Europe², the lack of transparency and participatory design of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (National Plans) phase is a reason for alarm. This is especially true for student councils and unions, youth organisations and civil society organisations in general, who in many cases have been on the frontline of the COVID-19 emergency, addressing the gaps in Member States' capacity for an emergency response.

We consider adequate involvement of stakeholders when the following conditions are met:

- There is an open call by the institutions (in this case, governments and parliaments) for civil society organisations to participate in the consultations;
- If a selection is needed, civil society organisations are selected along transparently communicated criteria, which should anyway aim to reflect the diversity and representativeness of these organisations;
- Documents are shared with civil society organisations in due time for their analysis and they are invited to discuss the NRRPs or submit their comments in a reasonable timeframe;
- The comments are either taken on board or dismissed with a transparent procedure (including publishing all the contributions that were submitted by all stakeholders);
- Civil society organisations are consulted in different phases of the designing process of the NRRPs: provide with proposals; provide with feedback to an initial draft by the institutions, both for the proposals and for the implementability;
- Civil society organisations are transparently identified as allies for supporting the recovery and resilience phases, and thus for implementing the plans. Subsequently, they are included among the beneficiaries of the NRRPs for the actions previously identified.

Listed below are some examples taken from our membership where these criteria were not respected:

- Czechia: Higher Education student union SK RVŠ reports not having been consulted, and that the plan was consulted with the 'Tripartita', a body consisting of government, employers and trade unions. While satisfied with the final version of the NRRP, since it focuses enough on education, research and digitalisation, SK RVŠ affirms that the plan should have been consulted with all the important stakeholders and civil society groups.

²https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CSE-ECNL-Participation-of-CSOs-in-the-preparation-of-the-EU-NRRPs_spread.pdf

- France: education associations CEMEA and La Ligue de l'Enseignement report that the *mouvement associatif* (which is an association gathering half of the associations in France) has been consulted by our prime minister to get its opinion about the limits of the recovery plan, but no followed up on that happened. Also, some forms of dialogue were announced at the local level, but had not happened by May. The associations conclude that there has not been a real consultation of the associations.

- Italy: Higher Education student union UDU reports that the organisation expressed several times its positions to fix the numerous problems of Italian Higher Education system, such as the graduation rate which is still too low, a reform of qualifying degrees, grants system, and too great a gap between universities in the south and those in the north of the country. These positions were put directly by the organisation, as well as through the National Student Council (CNSU), the highest university students' representative body in the country. However, since the political crisis in early 2021 that led to the formation of the new government, the drafting of the NRRP (which was the centre of the political crisis) happened behind closed doors without any consultations of the stakeholders. On this agree also the third sector associations ARCI and ARCS: according to these organisations, the latest version of the plan has several shortcomings (no support for international cooperation while financing business internationalisation; no actions on education for global citizenship; no mention of 'social enterprise') and even if the Third Sector Forum (Forum del Terzo Settore) presented its proposals to the Government and then illustrated them during the consultations as soon as the new Prime Minister was appointed, no further involvement took place thereafter.

- Romania: Higher Education student union ANOSR reports that in the first phase of developing the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP) in Romania (until December 2020), there was no involvement whatsoever of the civil society in drafting the Plan. The then-Minister of European Funds took part in a ANOSR Board Meeting to present the key components regarding higher education after the Government already published the plan. In the second phase of developing a new NRRP (February – May 2021) there was an improvement, albeit insufficient. Firstly, there was a debate on how the education component should be envisioned in the NRRP, but it was organised as a listening exercise from the Government, without anything put forward by them on which to debate upon. Afterwards, the NGO's were invited to propose reforms, by sending them to the Ministry of European Projects and Investments. Even though ANOSR welcomes the 12% allocation for education (the majority targeted on schools) and supports the majority of the core actions on higher education, there was no collaboration whatsoever regarding

the design and, furthermore, no accountability on answering whether they would take our proposals into consideration or not.

- Slovakia: Higher Education student union ŠRVŠ reports that the NRRP drafting process was marked by several leaks of the different versions and prioritisation of the funds allocation according to the parliamentary strength of the government's coalition parties. Stakeholders had the opportunity to participate only: through a Q&A session, through a general meeting with many stakeholders (to which initially neither rectors nor students were invited, and whose general discussion did not allow to thoroughly discuss the topics), and by sending comments to the published version of the plan, with a two-week deadline. ŠRVŠ submitted five comments, calling for: a reform the residency permit process for international students and adjusting the proposed scholarship scheme; renovation of Higher Education Institutions' buildings and student accommodation; including Higher Education students in the mental health reform, adding support centres at higher education institutions to the plan; including Higher Education teachers in the plan to upgrade teachers' qualification; a complete redoing of the proposed reform of Higher Education governance, since it tried to do all major reforms of Higher Education (changes in accreditation, financing and governance structures) at once without leaving time for discussion and implementation. In September, ŠRVŠ reached out to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance, requesting to be involved in the process, but it has not received a response ever since.
- Spain: The third sector association ACPP reports a speeded-up process of drafting of the NRRP, which it considers not very transparent and with obscurities about the process and the eligibility criteria of the key investments and projects, with the risk of involving large private firms in the formulation of the measures to the detriment of smaller players such as SMEs, self-employed individuals and the social and solidarity economy. The measures of execution of the recovery plan approved in December barely mentions guarantees of transparency and access to information. ACPP therefore joined the watchdog initiative Open Generation EU, a citizen platform open to participation that brings together civil society actors, experts, journalists and economic agents, in order to guarantee publicity, transparency, concurrence, objectivity, equality and non-discrimination of access. As of now, the platform has not been consulted by the government, but it has worked with the political parties and the parliamentary groups to introduce changes to the law with this end in sight.