



2022 -2024

Strategic Plan

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Introduction

This operational document lays down the foundation for the focus and work of the Connecting Youth platform for the 2022-2024 three-year period.

In this three-year strategic planning, Connecting Youth platform comes with a new name and a load of experience in identifying youth needs in the Western Balkans region and formulating proposals and recommendations to address those needs. The period that we leave behind holds everything from the social, to economic, political and environmental issues. Yet what brings them all together is how we tackled them, how we are planning on them, and how much we are including youth and society there.

The period under this plan welcomes our region with unemployment and economic development as the main concerns especially among youthⁱ, with low levels of trust in public institutionsⁱⁱ, devastated health systems due to the hit of COVID-19 and rooted corruption, weak economiesⁱⁱⁱ and harmed environments^{iv}.

Yet, the COVID-19 hit appears to have turned big hopes toward regional cooperation and the EU with recovery initiatives and projects aiming to help our region “get back on foot”^v. The three-year strategic planning of our platform wants to provide the space for youth inclusion in all these undertakings to ensure they fit the needs of youth but also provide solutions made for youth by youth.

Our approach derives from the long-term work and activity in the area of regional cooperation and youth development, thus emphasizing the need for the involvement of all actors and partners to ensure issues are discussed in a comprehensive way while fitting the relevant context throughout the region.

Connecting Youth 2017 - 2021

Connecting Youth was established in 2017 to promote youth connectivity in the region. It is the only initiative of its kind that works as a methodical initiative to promote the cooperation and dialogue between youth as means for a resilient and diverse region. The initiative is built upon an impact-oriented approach, sustainability, and systemic presence in the policy-making areas relevant to youth.

Connecting Youth's main target group is youth in the Western Balkans Six. Throughout its life, the platform has operated based on an online and offline approach, thus involving our target group in these two dimensions. For our online target group Connecting Youth offers a unique and tailor-made space for youth in the region and beyond where they can meet, plan, organise, implement, and voice up their action. Through this online space, youth can find partners for joint activities, exchange ideas, consult a youth library, and build and carry out outreach and lobbying action. Our offline dimension strives to reach out and involve youth in the region through practical interventions that aim to address the challenges of youth on the ground. We achieve this through our partnership with six umbrella organisations in the Western Balkans Six – National Youth Congress of Albania, Youth Council of Federation of BiH, Kosovar Youth Council, High School Students Union of Montenegro, National Youth Council of Macedonia, and National Youth Council of Serbia.

In October 2021, the platform was rebranded from the formerly known Western Balkans Youth Cooperation Platform to Connecting Youth. During 2021, the platform is also renewing its Memorandum of Cooperation with its six partners and also developing this 2022-2024 Strategic Plan.

Investing in competence, networking and advocacy

Connecting and Advocating at Tirana Connectivity Forum

CY has organized its regional events at the annual Tirana Connectivity Forum, thus putting youth challenges and issues at a regional level of discussion and agenda-setting (including Berlin Process and its role on youth development, EU Youth dialogue, Youth and connectivity agendas - Economic and Investment Plan, etc.).

Connecting Youth as a strategic partner

CY has become a strategic partner of different regional events, such as Young Bled Strategic Forum, thus organizing/facilitating sessions within the platform's pillars of work: education, participation and employability.

Connecting Youth as a facilitator

CY has amplified the capacities of youth partner organizations to further advance their work in their communities through comprehensive Capacity Building Programs. To do so, Connecting Youth has partnered with regional and youth organizations such as European Youth Forum, German Federal Youth Council, Centre for European Policy Studies, etc.

Connecting Youth as a bridge of cooperation

When acting regionally, CY has cooperated with several national/regional policy-making bodies (EU DG-s, Ministries throughout the region, intergovernmental organizations such as RYCO, RCC, ILO, OSCE, etc.) through events, publications, etc.

Connecting Youth as a regional reference point of youth

In 5 years, CY has organized 46 events with more than 1,500 participants at national and regional level. In addition, more than 16 CY publications were produced including research papers, reports, policy papers and promotional materials.

Striving for a systemic impact

The Western Balkans region is undergoing numerous dynamics deriving from the political transition period, challenges of economic and social development, and now the EU-led ambitious reforms as preconditions of the enlargement perspective. Development policies have very often neglected investments in social and human capital, by prioritizing public investments in infrastructure as an important driver of economic growth. Suggestive evidence shows in fact that developing economies spend less on schools than on roads, and that it takes about a generation (almost 24 years) for the output obtained by investing in schools to overtake that delivered by investing in roads. Connecting Youth advocates for consistent investments in human capital and an enhanced inter-sectoral coordination and youth-centered approach in programming public policies. CY lays the argument that a systemic and consistent partnership between youth civil society organizations and institutions can have an impact while addressing issues and prevalent challenges from the youth perspective.

Youth as partner of change and contributor in policy-making

What we strive to achieve during this upcoming three-year period is the increase of self-confidence and skills of the CY partners in driving positive changes in an environment where youth are asked and their responses are considered in different sectors/policies. This element is a major driver for the platform which commits to provide policy-recommendations, open new debates, provide non-formal discussions and lead shifting of the approach from serving youth top-down made projects/policies to bottom-up led and nourished.

Dialogue between institutions and youth organizations

The dialogue between youth organizations and relevant institutions becomes a crucial participation tool and an engaging element when it comes to incentivising youth civic and active involvement and positioning. Connecting Youth will further support, facilitate, engage and promote constructive dialogue with the aim of providing dynamic and inclusive spaces to discuss policies while taking into consideration youth perspectives as well. Our angle is that such dialogue shall not be enabled only on the mainstream youth needs but also on specific areas/sectors that need youth to be directly/indirectly involved and/or impacted.

Support for youth organizations to advance their representation in society

Connecting Youth will provide guidance and support for youth organizations in terms of capacities and resources to continue their work and increase the impact in their community. Through the new strategy, together with the platform's partners we will be able to provide tailored support to address the needs of the partners and member organizations in line with the areas of work of the upcoming period.

Vision

To cultivate youth-led approaches toward transformative processes in the region that consider youth as partners of change, resilience and sustainability.

Mission

Connecting Youth strives to provide a platform where youth organizations in the WB6 work together to foster youth connectivity in the region, contribute to accelerate youth involvement in the EU integration processes, and further support and advance the role and contribution of youth in the society.

Values

Meaningful engagement

Create change that matters

Working Together

Because we achieve much more together than divided

Innovation

Because only our big potential can lead to the big solutions

Inclusion

To ensure a more prosperous position for youth in the region

Strategic priorities 2022-2024

Bringing Youth to the tables that count!

Strengthening young people's democratic participation in sectoral policies

In the past years, regional development agendas sought to design and implement multiple programmes and projects aimed at empowering youth and increasing their participation in policymaking. Our advocacy throughout this time was focused mainly on informing youth in the region on such initiatives and supporting them to further advance their participation and benefit from such undertakings.

However, throughout our work and direct involvement with grassroots and youth umbrella organizations in the WB6, we strive and see youth not only as a capital and asset of future but as society's present key agents of progress and partners of change. Embedding a "present tense" approach in CY activities is a key aspect of our engagement with youth, rightfully demanding fast responses to their needs and concerns.

Our shift in advocacy is led by the fact that while institutional agendas plan for youth only in future tense, in the present youth in the Western Balkans are still facing the challenges of unstable economies, weak institutions, and lack of direct support. As such we believe that now we have the unique chance to transform the youth position from beneficiary to actor of change thus being an assessor and integral part of policymaking processes.

While the region fluctuates from different challenges such as environmental/climate change, brain drain and weak economies, high levels of migration, and other socio-political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic - aimed to be tackled by the potential robust results of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans Six, the switch in including youth perspectives and contribution to address all these challenges is also seen from EU and regional-led side initiatives such as *Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport*, *European Year of Youth 2022*, *EU Youth Strategy 2019 - 2027*, *Tirana European Youth Capital 2022*, *Tirana Connectivity Forum*, *Young Bled Strategic Forum*, *EU Youth Dialogue*, *Conference on the Future of Europe*, etc.

All these initiatives create the basis for Connecting Youth's path to achieving this objective. While the challenges of the region remain specific, youth involvement should be curated as such as well. By using all the below-mentioned means, Connecting Youth will further strengthen youth participation in sectoral policy-making. We will focus on the process of the planning and implementation of the EIP, thus narrowing down the objective toward the following:

- Informing Youth on the planning and implementation of the EIP with all its flagship projects, while giving focus to infrastructure projects / mobility, green and blue economy, digital agenda and human capital development projects
- Further strengthening youth participation in the EIP through evidence-based research and assessment of the implementation process in both levels, regional and national

- Further advancing the dialogue between institutional stakeholders - key implementers of the projects and youth to maximize the understanding of each project and the policies through which they are embedded.

An enabling platform

Enhancing youth connectivity in the region

The systemic presence of Connecting Youth throughout the five years, and its sustainable growth during this period have brought a multiplier effect in the ecosystem of youth organizations and initiatives in the region. Youth in the region were provided with an enabling platform, a hub that despite undergoing dynamic developments proved to be a nexus for cooperation, connection and exchanges on ongoing processes, youth policies, ideas, activities and achievements. Being the backbone of the platform's work, youth connectivity throughout this period has been presented as a tool that opens new avenues toward better policies in education, employment participation topics.

Partner organizations of the Connecting Youth platform cooperated under no other criteria but one of commitment to enhance youth connectivity in the region and further support the role of youth in the society. Based on these efforts, the platform has worked with more than six umbrella partner organizations and through them has reached out to more than 420 youth organizations and 550 high schools throughout the region.

What does this tell us? - this great potential needs to be strengthened and equipped with the necessary information to carry on reaching the objectives and mission of the platform.

As such our grassroots factor needs further attention in the upcoming period. With a vibrant region undergoing numerous dynamics, youth at the national and local level should be able to follow up and walk the walk in line with the regional dynamics.

Amplifying the energy and potential of youth working on the ground, remains absolutely core to this particular objective. Partner organizations are eager for more direct opportunities to connect and collaborate with each other, especially as we thrive from the isolation of the pandemic. Our direct consultations with partners have shown that they see the platform to be more than just an advocator, but rather as a hub and provider of successful practices and policy recommendations to increase the cooperation between the organizations and the effectiveness of partners' work on the ground.

To this end we are developing new community engagement targets focused on regional engagement and empowerment. As mentioned, these targets will aim to reach out not only partner organizations but also community members, to provide a feeling of belonging and inclusion where ideas are discussed, and the contribution of each community member is taken into consideration. Community building and engagement fosters connection, innovation, collective learning and growth. Therefore, the objective will be narrowed down to the following:

- Connecting Youth will be further developed to provide an online space for youth engagement in the three pillars of work (education, participation and employability) through new multimedia tools (podcasts, blogging, articles) that enable youth connectivity and mobilization across the region.

- The platform will target media organizations across the region as substantial partners while promoting the work of youth organizations in the ground and also tackling challenges affecting youth.
- Both Ideas Space and Collab sections in the platform's website will bring new features such as surveys, ideas wall, online forums, mappings, etc. for involvement which will translate to basis and material for discussion in all events, activities to be carried out through the platform.

Investing in skills

Advancing the capacities of youth organizations to uphold and represent their position

The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans will spur a robust investment of around 30 billion Euros through projects in infrastructure, digitalization, green agenda, human capital development, etc. It also represents another incentive for further convergence of the region with the EU within the enlargement perspective of our region.

On the other hand, there is a turbulent low trust and satisfaction among youth toward public institutions, civil society and the media. An opportunity-driven environment for youth remains low, while there are still severe gaps between education and labor market demands. While globalization and technology are taking over even the most basic services, youth in the region struggle in having the necessary skills to handle all this technology.

So, as we aim to bring youth to the table, this objective is directly related to equipping youth / youth organizations with resources and capacities that enable an "uphold and representation of their position" in the society. What does this mean? - Drawing from the think tank expertise^{vi} Connecting Youth will continue to provide specific programs for partner organizations and member organizations to amplify their skills, engage in new such programs and further boost their work in their community.

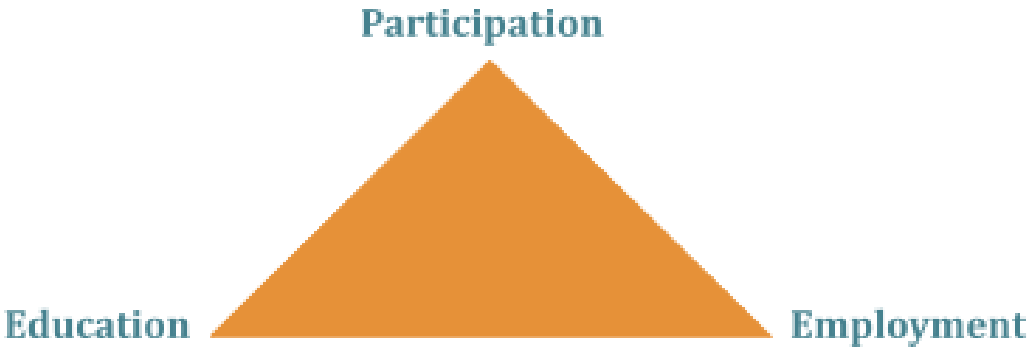
With our new strategy, special focus will be given to the fundraising mechanism - as a joint action with partner organizations within the platform, which will be utilized to further develop our sub-granting scheme for partner organizations and provide a wider capacity-building program for partner and member organizations. On this journey that aims for a continuity of sustainability and increase of capacities, the platform will cooperate with partner organizations and youth stakeholders / actors in the region, as elaborated in the yearly Action Plans.

Based on the lessons learnt from the previous capacity building programs such as implementation period, format of implementation, objectives and goals, the capacity building programs of this upcoming period will be designed to respond to the needs of partner organizations in line with the platform's areas of work and instruments to achieve its objectives and organize the activities. To do so, Connecting Youth will partner with specialized think tanks, CSO-s, academia, tech organizations and media outlets to ensure diverse and "all-angles included" approaches are taken into consideration through each module - program provided. This objective will be narrowed down through the following:

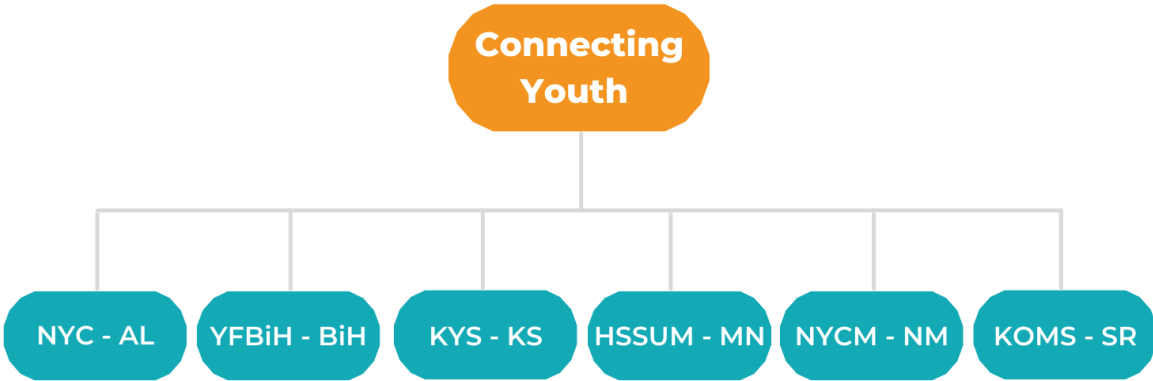
- Enhancing the Sub-granting schemes for partner organizations with activities to be implemented in cooperation with member organizations.

- Organizing sharing experience programs such as study tours / visits, exchange visits with Connecting Youth institutional partners in the region.
- Developing Capacity Building Programs for partner organizations and member organizations on specific areas in line with the strategic objectives, areas of work and activities to be implemented throughout the year.

Areas of work and Connecting Youth approach



Connecting Youth Organizational Chart



Member organizations within each partner organization grassroots level

Endnotes

ⁱ RCC.(2021). Balkan Barometer 2021 - Public Opinion

ⁱⁱhttps://www.oecdilibrary.org/sites/a8c72f1ben/1/3/9/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/a8c72f1ben&_csp_=762150f8ebcc22b4a63f8aec03e7faf9&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book

ⁱⁱⁱ World Bank Group. (2020). The Economic and Social Impact of COVID-19 - Labour Markets

^{iv} World Bank Group. (2021). Going Green Means Cleaner Air, Healthier Living in the Western Balkans. Accessed on 26 September 2021 at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/05/17/going-green-means-cleaner-air-healthier-living-in-the-western-balkans>

^v European Commission. (2020). Press release “Western Balkans' leaders meeting: EU reinforces support to address COVID-19 crisis and outlines proposal for post-pandemic recovery. Accessed on 26 September 2021 at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_777

^{vi} Connecting Youth is established by the Cooperation and Development Institute - a think tank specialized in Connectivity, Youth and EU Integration, based in Albania.

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