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# Towards a Brighter Future for Younger People

Lessons learned from the Berlin Demography  
Days 2022

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Decision-makers should include younger people in participatory mechanisms and policy deliberations at all levels.

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Stronger investment in mental health services is crucial to address the increase in demand.

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Education systems need to ensure that younger people of all backgrounds and in all circumstances acquire relevant knowledge and develop appropriate skills and competencies, including social, civic and emotional skills.

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## Introduction

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From 16 to 18 May 2022, more than 50 international experts from politics, science and society discussed the perspectives of younger people in Germany, Europe and around the globe at this year's Berlin Demography Days (BDD). The three-day event was organised by Population Europe and Diakonie Deutschland, funded by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in cooperation with the German Federal Ministry of Health and the German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community. Partners included the German Youth Institute (DJI), the European Association for Population Studies (EAPS), the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Below, we present the main discussions, conclusions and policy recommendations that emerged during the event.

## Younger People's Voice in Politics

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The participation of younger people in public life – regardless of their background – goes beyond voting in public elections and should be further promoted. This has been one of the most often repeated statements throughout BDD. Fostering younger people's participation is seen as a necessity for stakeholders from all over the world, not only as an individual concern but also as an investment towards engendering inclusive, green, resilient and sustainable development and equitable growth. It should be continuously strengthened by systematically including younger people in participatory mechanisms and policy deliberations at all levels.

Discussions on this topic often raise the question of the role played by older generations, an issue that is not a key concern in current policy agendas according to our participants. Here, the focus suggested by our speakers tended to be improving younger people's participation in public life, as their involvement is pivotal in creating innovative instruments that allow for stronger relationships between generations. This implies that older people should share power and influence with the younger generations, opening space for trust, participation and dialogue.

Youth organisations were mentioned as key actors to unlock younger people's participation, but very often these organisations face a lack of a solid foundation and resources.

There is a need for structural funding and for a permanent and transparent collaboration with public institutions to create policy agendas based on co-decision mechanisms between younger and older generations.

## Consensus around voting at 16

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Participating in elections is not only a wish of younger people, but it is also an important step to strengthen democracies around the globe by including them in public elections. Even if in Europe, statistically, the share of individuals between 16 and 18 years of age represents a small number of voters and will probably have a minor impact on election results, the main argument towards allowing 16 years-old citizens to vote is related to creating politically active citizens that would remain interested and active in this area over their life course. The discussion about lowering the voting age is also motivated by the strong engagement of younger people in political activities, particularly on topics of generational fairness and climate change. They are interested and personally motivated to get involved in politics and related decision-making. Accordingly, there is a need to create paths where this energy can translate into change.

## Attitudes, Aspirations and Crisis Resilience

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The pandemic has often amplified pre-existing inequalities and development risks, where we can see an increasing gap between potential and actual labour market opportunities for younger people in most countries. Experts have already documented that younger people have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic in different spheres such as mental health, educational opportunities and early-career entry. Although the majority of younger people will be able to overcome the stresses and deficits caused by the pandemic, those in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations will continue to be affected in the short-, medium- and probably also long-term by stresses and deficits suffered during the crisis.

The concept of resilience is regularly brought into this context with a call to younger people to be more resilient. However, as experts demonstrated, what this resilience actually entails is often up for debate. Some researchers investigate their labour market participation and long-term consequences on economic resilience, even up to, and beyond,

the time of their retirement. In contrast, other researchers look at the mental health and emotional intelligence of these generations. Regardless, in view of the COVID-19 pandemic and the future crises that younger people will likely face, it is a central social and political task to create education and support structures in such a way that they compensate for the deficits caused by the pandemic as well as to address the inequalities in the educational and developmental opportunities that have already been existing before the pandemic. Policymakers must ask how they can support younger people to recover from crises and how they can create a more effective future – politically, socially and economically – that younger people can thrive in.

Active engagement of younger people as co-creators of new knowledge to find appropriate solutions have been often highlighted at BDD as being of key importance. There was a general consensus on the need to not only create and offer more guidance like one-on-one mentoring opportunities and career services before younger people finish secondary education but also activities to improve mental health, particularly in terms of emotional skills and emotional regulation. At the end of the day, younger people often know what support they need, and it is the role of decision-makers to listen. Understanding the complexity and diversity among younger people leads to a demand for more policy flexibility as a key element for future policies is to ensure proper inclusion in the labour market and within society, leaving no one behind.

## Younger People and the Life Course

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Experiences, challenges and vulnerabilities during childhood and adolescence shape – to a large extent – the way individuals cope with the rest of their lives. For this reason, policy strategies aimed at supporting younger people are critical to overall improvement in the future of our societies. Additionally, both quantitative analyses based on longitudinal data and qualitative research are critical to the life course approach to understand the complexities that influence young people's experiences, especially in the context of developing countries.

Related to the life course, experts highlighted the impact of the pandemic on different areas of younger people's lives and the need to overcome potential long-term welfare consequences. For example, in many countries, the deaths of grandparents or parents from COVID-19 left younger people as the reference person for their siblings and younger relatives. Additionally, access to remote learning during

lockdowns has been very unequal depending on the place of residence and social class. Even within countries with readily available internet, urban-rural discrepancies prevented true access for those living further from the main cities. Fighting against younger people dropping out the education system is still an important challenge for many countries and should be prioritised by policymakers. This requires intersectional policies that consider the family and community environments in which younger people live.

The increase of telework during and after the pandemic and its consequences for younger people were also discussed at BDD. Experts indicated that telework brought more flexibility for individuals to manage different areas of their lives and that younger people embraced the use of new technologies and adapted faster to telework than older cohorts. However, due to the more isolated nature of teleworking, it is important to consider mental health and support workers to prevent stress, isolation and anxiety.

In demographic studies, the realisation of fertility intentions – meaning that individuals were able to have the number of kids they wished to have – is often used as an indicator of well-being or life satisfaction. Nowadays, this indicator is far from being achieved regardless of the economic strength of one's country. At BDD, experts discussed the main causes of this trend. On the one hand, uncertainty about climate change, the economy and future prospects, in general, seem to be playing a key role among younger people's waning desires to have kids in European countries, while in other parts of the globe, reasons are more related to concrete constraints such as access to the labour market and housing. When looking at the future of teleworking as well as fertility intentions, an opportunity might arise for younger people, where the decision to have children could be made more easily through the knowledge of flexible working environments.

## Policies Supporting Younger People

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The fourth topic discussed during BDD refers to policies supporting younger people. We knew from the global financial crisis that these times of upheaval can have long-term consequences on younger people's labour market access and broader socio-economic outcomes, much more so than for other generations. Many governments, therefore, included a range of youth-specific measures in their COVID-19 support packages. However, while labour market measures to support younger people in finding and keeping jobs and work-based learning opportunities have been fre-

quently deployed amidst the COVID-19 crisis, emergency income support measures have been more varied and less comprehensive. Similar observations can be made for mental health: the increase in funding and availability of mental health services has been moderate and unable to match the increased demand.

In addition, as stressed by Veerle Miranda (OECD), governments are not always reaching younger people who need it the most: despite the Youth Guarantee initiative in EU countries and the strong attention devoted to their labour market integration, barely one third of all younger people who are neither in employment, nor in education or training were registered with the public employment services in 2019. To reduce inactivity and unemployment among younger people, it is important to improve outreach. But to do so, we need to better understand who is not reaching out for support and why. There can be a variety of reasons: younger people might not be aware of the support they can receive, lack trust in public authorities or simply prefer to remain inactive.

Education systems need to become more equitable and efficient, recognising not only the heterogeneity among younger people but also different forms of learning, including informal and non-formal learning and work-based learning. Moreover, it is not only about how much instruction is provided, but also the quality of the education is of key importance for learning success. Societies still face a lack of adequate funding and infrastructure, as well as a shortage of educators and teachers, among others, to equip younger people with key competencies for life-long learning and active participation in society. Not only basic skills (such as literacy, numeracy and problem solving) are needed but also social, civic, emotional and other skills. Collaboration across stakeholders, including schools, employers and trade unions is crucial. As vulnerability stems from a range of complex factors that compound over time, investing in pre-primary education and early childhood education and care is crucial to improve their outcomes. Participants also recommended to keep educational institutions open if future pandemic waves arrive, considering appropriate protective measures, since face-to-face education is the most effective way of learning.

## Policy Recommendations

1. Decision-makers should include younger people in participatory mechanisms and policy deliberations at all levels.

2. Governments should improve outreach, support and protection for young people in vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances to allow them to participate in the labour market and social life and to ensure that no young person is left behind.
3. Stronger investment in mental health services is crucial to address the increase in demand.
4. Education systems need to ensure that younger people of all backgrounds and in all circumstances acquire relevant knowledge and develop appropriate skills and competencies, including social, civic and emotional skills. ■

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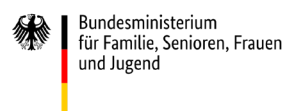
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