

# THINK BIG, START SMALL, ACT NOW!

**Strengthen partnerships with youth for high quality, inclusive education, where all youth can realize their dreams of education as The Best way to succeed in life.**

We are adolescents and youth from 22 countries in Europe and Central Asia. We are as young as 14 and as old as 25. We are secondary and university students, and one of us has never been to school at all. We work and have all kinds of abilities and interests, but all of us share a common desire to improve equity and quality in education in our communities and in the region. We developed this statement at the Europe and Central Asia Regional Consultation with adolescents and youth on Education and the Post-2015 Development Goals organized by UNICEF in Istanbul, Turkey, 1-6 September 2013.

We attended this regional consultation because we believe in the power of youth. We believe that education is essential and central to socialization and cultural integration. Schools are one of the main actors in guiding youth to build their personality, develop their interests and create the future they dream of. It's of crucial necessity to keep investing in our education systems and to encourage youth to have an active role in our changing world.

We applaud the substantial progress that governments in Europe and Central Asia have made in reforming the education systems we depend upon. We believe we can help bring even more positive changes in order to improve

and implement reforms in our education systems. We youth are the ones who feel, know and understand what it is like to be a student in our times. Allow us to share with you our experiences, ideas and visions for what high quality, inclusive education can be in our region. We can show you small, youth-driven successes that have big impacts. We can work with you to ACT NOW to advance education successes.

**We pledge our support and call on participants in the Regional Ministerial Education Conference and other stakeholders to work closely with youth to improve education quality and access in our countries and communities.** We call for action to improve education inclusion and quality, to provide more health education in schools and to strengthen links between education and youth employment. Our recommendations are solution-oriented and encourage community-based approaches, but above all, they are based on partnerships. Even though we cannot change the whole world all at once, we are sure that together with you, as partners, we can change small parts of the world near to us in our schools and local communities.

**To improve education, we call on you to work with youth to:**

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## 1 Ensure education is inclusive

We are highly concerned that millions of children and adolescents in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia are not getting an education – 2.5 million children are out of school; 1.6 million are missing out on pre-primary education; and millions more are in school but are not developing the skills they need. Adolescents, very young children, ethnic minority children and children with disability are especially affected. Many factors affect inclusion, from parents' and youths' attitudes about the value of education and high education costs, to laws that prohibit children with disability from participating in mainstream education structures. We find it necessary to:

- **Change attitudes to better support inclusive education.** Education inclusion won't happen unless children, their parents, teachers and community

leaders feel it should happen and take action. Dialog and awareness-raising on the value of education should be promoted and supported in creative ways.

- **Develop and support youth, teachers and others to act as role models.** Audiences can better identify with and feel inspired by individual, personal stories that show how life challenges can be overcome when you are well educated.
- **Ensure students are not marginalized or segregated in any way within learning spaces.** In addition to ensuring teachers' openness to, and acceptance of inclusive education, more teacher training is needed on how to work in the same classroom with students

- from different cultural, ethnic, religious, sexual or other backgrounds, and with students with different abilities and learning needs.
- **Remove legislative and policy barriers to inclusive education.** Laws and policies that bar students with disability from mainstream education should be identified and revoked as a matter of urgency.

Changes in attitudes and teaching methods that support inclusive education should not be blocked by outdated legislation.

- **Reduce and/or contain education costs.** As much as possible, provide books, uniforms and school transportation free or at very low cost for all students.



“My name is Murad, and this is my story: I didn’t walk until I was 15, when I taught myself to get around with crutches. I never went to school because there was no access – no physical, structural support and no social acceptance or initiative to ensure my involvement. Instead,

I taught myself to read and write using my brother’s books. I became convinced that I couldn’t be the only person in this situation, and I decided to take responsibility to fight for a change. I am now a motivational speaker and project assistant for an NGO supporting children with disability. I try to empower youth to believe in themselves and to overcome every difficulty they will encounter in life. I encourage them to go to school, even though I know how tough it is to deal with poverty, the bad attitudes of others and even their own difficult feelings about themselves and their lives. But if I can make changes in my own life, they can too, and I am responsible for showing them that. Together, we will learn how to transform disability into strength. Many young people excluded from education can benefit from the examples of role models who have overcome barriers to getting an education.”

## 2 Improve education quality

Despite efforts of improvement, there is still a deficit in education quality in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia that particularly affects us youth. Learning materials and facilities often remain outdated and insufficient to support safe and effective learning. We call for better training and more practical learning opportunities, using modern technologies. We also stress the need for education to help us develop life skills that support our empowerment in all areas of life. Our recommendations are to:

- **Prioritize support for ongoing teacher training and professional development** to improve the knowledge and skills of teachers to implement more learner-centered teaching and learning approaches. As much as possible, provide opportunities for teachers to participate in classes and other education processes where teachers are already using more innovative teaching methods.
- **Ensure that textbooks and other learning materials, equipment and facilities are up-to-date and support safe, practical, competency-based learning.**

Computer and Internet access are chief priorities for students, who need these technologies to engage in modern learning and employment.

- **Engage current and former students in developing, monitoring and evaluating education reforms.** We strongly believe that by working together with education authorities, at local and national levels, we can ensure that improvements to education quality are fulfilled.





“I am Mădălin. I grew up within a modest Roma family, and we lived in a small village, where I attended primary and secondary school. I decided to become an actor so that I could be anything I wished through the lives of my characters. As an actor, I thought my ethnicity would not count anymore. But the road to acting wasn't easy. My schools were not equipped to help me achieve my dream.

They didn't have the books I needed or Internet access, and my teachers didn't encourage me in any way. Instead, when I was little, I borrowed books from the communal library. Although everybody knew me there, if I got a book that was torn, I was sure to say 'Look, it's torn. I'll fix it...!' I would cover the torn books in white paper and take care of them so they wouldn't think I was the one who tore them up. Despite such barriers to education, I managed to be the first in my class to pass the eighth grade exam, and to go to high school and to college. And I became an actor! I am now involved in a theater group, and we visit Roma communities and their schools. We participate in classes and try to make them more dynamic and interactive. We also teach children about theater and involve them in activities to raise their self-esteem and participation. Theater and drama are important approaches to engaging youth in defining themselves and improving their education.”

### 3 Implement health education curricula

Adolescents turn to different sources for information on health in our region and elsewhere – schools, peers, radio, newspapers and more. We believe that schools must play a much stronger role in delivering health education to young people, who in some cases, say they receive no information at all. In order to participate in educational processes, obtain benefits and serve as role models for others, young people must learn how to be responsible for, and protect their own health, particularly as their bodies are changing, and their social roles and responsibilities along with them. Health must become a core value for young people, and education services must do a better job at supporting healthy behaviors that last a lifetime. We propose to:

- **Include health education within formal school curricula.** The aim is to promote and develop

students' knowledge and life skills regarding the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

- **Support cooperation between public and private actors, including non-governmental organizations.** Public and private actors should work together to promote non-formal education on health issues, including nutrition.
- **Ensure young people are aware of and have access to psychosocial counseling both in and out of school.** Youth need counseling for prevention of, and recovery from drug and alcohol abuse and sexual exploitation and abuse.



“My name is Maria, and I am a simple teenager. I study journalism, and I love it! When I was 9 years old I found out about my HIV status. My mom didn't want to tell me, but

I saw a piece of paper with my name on it that also read 'HIV positive'. I tried to 'explore' all sides of my problem and figure out what it meant and how my health would be in the coming years. I felt different, and I admit, I cried. I couldn't stand the idea of being different. But the past years have shown me that being different is not that bad. I have been involved in school campaigns that promote education about human rights and HIV and AIDS. This kind of involvement gives me strength to carry on. It gives me hope that one day, every child will learn at school about HIV and AIDS and about the fact that being different can actually involve good things, too. I think that schools can and should do more to work with young people like me to help other children learn and care about health issues.”

## 4 Strengthen links between education and labor markets

Youth in our region are facing a major challenge: unemployment. Without clear links to employment, many youth struggle to see the value of education and to design an education path that helps them shape a vocation and career. Too often, education curricula are mismatched with job opportunities, and students lack opportunities to develop the work experience needed to secure a permanent job. Education decision-makers should work with youth to:

- **Develop and implement curricula that are both theoretical and practical.** Learners should be supported to develop competencies linked to current and future labor market opportunities in order to enable their access to decent work.
- **Create standards and mechanisms to expand volunteer and paid internships.** Youth need learning opportunities that are recognized as **work experience**.
- Motivate public and private employers, including non-profit and for-profit organizations, to partner with universities. More organizations should be engaged to hire young students, supporting equal opportunity regardless of sex, ethnicity and ability.
- Continue to improve vocational education opportunities for young people. Undertake campaigns to change public attitudes about the prestige and value of vocational education.



“My name is Emre, and I am happily working in a Youth Center Association. But, a few years ago, I was a Computer Science student with no job and no possibilities to sustain myself. It was a rough time. I was very pessimistic and felt hopeless about my future. But one day a friend suggested I volunteer for a youth project. The project did not involve

anything I studied in college, and I had never volunteered before, so I wasn't too enthusiastic. Once you choose an education path, you are not allowed to make a change, and I wasn't sure this project was the right thing for me. The project was called “My aim for 12,” and I provided archery training for children with a physical impediment. I was amazed and surprised at the happiness I saw on every child's face when they hit the target! Those little moments changed my life. If I had had this experience earlier, I would have studied something else and made better choices about my career path. Now, my colleagues and I try our best to inform and advise as many young people as possible about the benefits of voluntary activities and help them gain experience, learn about their interests and integrate into their communities. I think volunteer opportunities for youth are key ways to think big, start small and act now to improve the links between education and jobs for youth!”

These are our dreams! We strongly urge governments and their partners in Europe and Central Asia to hold further consultations with us youth, to consider us as partners and to identify additional good practices that can be scaled up in support of high quality, inclusive education.

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