

YOUNG, SUSTAINABLE & FUTURE-PROOF

BRUSSELS BY BIKE



YOUTH IN THE LEAD

YOUNG, SUSTAINABLE & FUTURE-PROOF

BRUSSELS BY BIKE

Cycling from Groningen to Brussels to hand over the opinions & dreams of young people - directly to Dutch & European policy makers and politicians. The final document does not belong in a pile on a desk, but directly in the hands and heads of political leaders.

826 young people

4 themes

9 cities

508 kilometers

Young people play a crucial role within society. At the same time, we are often forgotten and sometimes even ignored. Nevertheless, all young people have dreams, visions, wishes and ideas for and about the future. Dreams that are worthy of being heard. The creativity and fresh perspectives of young people can ensure that policy does not only work now, but also has a positive impact on the future. Let's step away from short-term-thinking and fight for a better tomorrow. For our future, and the future of upcoming generations

● CITIZENSHIP & DEMOCRACY

The vast majority of young people feel unheard in politics. We want to participate, but we are not being heard. In order to talk about youth, we feel that politicians have to be in (direct) contact with us. This requires commitment from all politicians: local, national and international. Visit schools, sportclubs and community centers - not only during elections. Young people are not structurally listened to, not structurally consulted. Lower the voting age to 16 and consult young people on all policy areas that concern us, both now and in the future. Listen, act & provide follow-up.

● SELF DEVELOPMENT

Young people are concerned about their own future and the future of our generation. Discovering who you are, discovering what you want, is a challenge. Especially in today's rapidly changing society. Young people feel that the current education system does not prepare us enough for the future. There is too much focus on achieving excellent results and too little focus on developing soft skills with hardly any opportunities or time left for extracurricular activities. A significant amount of young people is very concerned about the mental state of our generation. High performance pressure; the influence of social media; mounting debt; climate change; structural inequality; all this, and more, has a major impact on our well-being. Inventing and shaping yourself is incredibly important, but is very difficult for us because of current social problems and systems.

● INCLUSION

Where you come from, what you look like and how you grew up matters for your chances as a young person. A harsh reality. Not everyone has equal opportunities to participate. Schools have a leading role to play in combating this. Education and information are key. Young people feel that current laws and regulation will not result in sufficient change. A change of perspective is required. This can be realised at a young age. Young people see racism and discrimination as learned behavior. From an early age we must realise that not everyone is the same, but everyone is equal - this also requires a fair representation of society in public life.

● CLIMATE & SUSTAINABILITY

Climate is the most important side issue. Politicians consider it important, until another urgent matter comes up. Yet we cannot ignore it. There is a climate crisis, why are we not acting upon it? The majority of young people are concerned about the climate. We often reflect the responsibility of 'fixing' climate issues on ourselves. A heavy load for young shoulders to carry. More ownership must be created in society. Not only among young people, but also among adults. Climate targets are set, but not achieved. Therefore, compliance with the agreements is not being realised. Work together to ensure that carrying this burden is not only reflected on the younger generation, but that intergenerational solidarity will play a crucial role within the climate crisis.

PREFACE

Young people are the present and the future. However, this is not reflected in current policies. Politicians seem used to short term thinking: not thinking about the implications of their policies on the future. The fresh perspective of young people is often lacking in Dutch, but also in European policy. Young people are resilient, future-oriented and creative. Qualities that come in handy when designing policy for the long term. In addition, an unfiltered view, honesty and intergenerational solidarity are necessities that young people can add to current and future policies. Looking out for each other, looking ahead to the future.

METHOD

From the 18th until the 31st of May, the Dutch Youth Representatives on European Affairs, Leah Corsmit and Leverne Nijman, cycled from Groningen to Brussels. Along the way, they gave guest lectures and organised events to engage with young people. From climate and democracy to inclusion and self-development - every opinion matters!

The input is collected from conversations, guest lectures at secondary schools, events and dialogues with young people between the ages of 12 and 28. The places visited on the route to Brussels were: Groningen, Assen, Dedemsvaart, Zwolle, Deventer, Warnsveld, Zutphen, Arnhem, Nijmegen and Den Bosch. This route was deliberately chosen because the guest lectures we give throughout the whole year are requested more by schools in the western part of The Netherlands. Furthermore, young people from less urbanised regions can visit other organised events less often, because of transportation boundaries.

The guest lectures were given at secondary schools in both practical and theoretical oriented school levels (in Dutch: mavo, havo and vwo). During the guest lectures and the events the online tool Mentimeter was used to save the input online.

We would like to point out that this is not a scientific and fully representative study. The vision of this report is based on the opinions of young people consulted during this project. Of course, this does not alter the fact that the opinions and visions must be heard.

DUTCH YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

It is important that the voice of young people is heard. At home, at school, in the community, but also in the world. That is what the youth representatives do. The Youth Representatives on European Affairs travel throughout the country to talk to young people, to hear what they find important. They do this by giving guest lectures and workshops at schools and organising events for, and with, young people. All opinions and ideas collected by the youth representatives are discussed with politicians, policy makers, professionals and taken to conferences and summits in the Netherlands and abroad. With their boundless enthusiasm, they are committed to all themes that concern young people.



The Dutch Youth Representatives European Affairs built the bridge between young people and (international) politics. For example, they participate in the European Youth Forum, The Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Youth Dialogue.

THE EUROPEAN YOUTH DIALOGUE

During the European Youth Dialogue every six months, European youth (representatives) and policymakers come together to work on recommendations for a specific theme. The aim is that youth policy at European, national and local level is not developed for young people, but with young people. A cycle lasts one and a half years and each cycle focuses on a different theme. To ensure that the views of as many different young people as possible are taken into account in the report(s), European policy papers and conferences, the youth representatives give guest lectures in schools and organise projects and events for young people. Consultations are also organised by the National Youth Council (NJR) in collaboration with youth representatives to collect the opinions of a diverse group of young people and to represent them in European politics.

THE EUROPEAN YOUTH GOALS

The aim of the 6th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue - Youth in Europe: what next? which took place in 2017/2018 - revolved around the creation of the EU Youth Strategy for 2019-2027. As a result, the 11 European Youth Goals were created. These goals reflect the views of young Europeans and represent the vision of those active in the EU Youth Dialogue:

- 1.Connecting EU with Youth
- 2.Equality of All Genders
- 3.Inclusive Societies
- 4.Information & Constructive Dialogue
- 5.Mental Health & Wellbeing
- 6.Moving Rural Youth Forward
- 7.Quality Employment for All
- 8.Quality Learning
9. Space and Participation for All
10. Sustainable Green Europe
11. Youth Organisations & European Programmes

The EU Youth Strategy should contribute to realizing this youth vision by mobilizing policy tools at EU level and actions at national, regional and local level by all stakeholders.

TOPICS BRUSSELS BY BIKE

Citizenship & democracy

European Youth Goal: **1, 4 & 9**

Inclusion

European Youth Goal: **2, 3 & 6**

Self-development

European Youth Goal: **5, 7, 8 & 11**

Climate & sustainability

European Youth Goal: **10**



Co-funded by
the European Union

CITIZENSHIP & DEMOCRACY

The vast majority of young people feel that they are not heard, that their interests are often not taken into account. It is not clear where and how young people can participate. Many indicate that they do not know where to go if they want to participate in politics. Young people mentioned that their trust in the government, locally, nationally and internationally, is low. The question: "what's the point?" was often repeated. What is the point of making your voice heard if the government does not listen, or twists your words to suit their (party) interests? Young people are only listened to when it suits them. Not structurally, but sporadically and selectively.

Politicians often pretend to listen, but mostly nothing comes out of it. A large part of the distrust of young people stems from this. There is little to no follow-up on input and (impactful) mistakes are rarely acknowledged and admitted. One of the young people we spoke to said that trust comes slowly, but leaves fast. Major mistakes, such as the Dutch childcare benefits scandal (*toeslagenaffaire*), the intransparent corona policy decisions, and the deleted text messages of Prime Minister Rutte, fuel this mistrust.

Essentially, it is all about communication, transparency, and honesty: admit your mistakes and show compassion and empathy. In this way, political figures become more approachable for young people and they can better identify with them.

What is an ideal form of youth participation? Communication, feedback & transparency

- Talk to young people directly: young people should be consulted before decisions are made about policies that will have an impact on them;
- Feedback: simply hearing what politicians and policymakers do with the given input. Even if something doesn't work or can not be done. Not just wanting to share the success stories.
- Transparency and honesty are key; involve young people in the process after a consultation: let young people not only participate in the discussion, but also participate. Make sure they are a crucial factor in the policymaking process;
- Have young people check records and documents: is a report or document being written? Have the participating youth check this out! With this measure they can properly indicate whether what is written also corresponds to the things they have said;
- Adults should approach young people, not the other way around. This is an important form of accessibility and showing the will to talk to young people.

CITIZENSHIP & DEMOCRACY

From an early age: (European) citizenship education

Politics is not a sexy topic, but it is extremely important to involve children in the world of politics from an early age. When children and young people receive little information about political processes at school, they find the topic less important which hinders participation.

'You cannot expect young people to learn everything from their parents' (Soleil, 20).

Ensure that Dutch citizenship education improves. Young people are not taught to form a well-founded opinion of their own. Citizenship education is currently too theoretical. This has to change. It should be about big, social questions and themes. The question "How do you relate to the world as a citizen?" could be central to this. Citizenship education should be a subject in which you get prepared for real life, for your role in society. It should therefore be a subject that students receive throughout their whole school career, but there shouldn't be a final exam. Simply participating is enough to find and shape your own place in society.

A prevailing feeling among young people is that their voice does not make a difference.

'Politicians often do something different than their promises. There is little to no explanation about the choices they make. As a result, there is insufficient communication towards voters, which also contributes to distrust of politicians' (Noa, 21).

Voting rights 16

Remarkably, many young people indicated that the right to vote should be lowered to 16 years. They believe that young people at this age have the insights to help decide on policy. Moreover, young people often have a different view of things than adults, which is currently not well reflected in the election results. In addition, youths think that it contributes to the support for the decisions that are taken at the political level. All young people are still of compulsory school age at this age. Citizenship education can link well to this by making the elections more understandable and the lessons more practical. Young people are convinced that this will not only increase the amount of voters, but there will also be a more level playing field between young people because they all acquire the same basic knowledge about politics and elections at school.

-

INCLUSION

Inclusivity: a big topic. Young people find it extremely important that everyone accepts that everyone is different, but equal.

Not everyone looks the same, not everyone behaves the same, not everyone finds the same things important, but that doesn't matter. Everyone is different, but we must realise that everyone is equal - and should therefore be treated equally. The vast majority of young people recognize that this is not the case in our society at the moment, and that has to change.

Education

A concrete solution put forward by young people is to focus on equality in education at an early (primary) age. Children should be taught early on that everyone is equal. Inequality is seen as a learned behaviour. By paying attention to this in education, we can ensure that future generations do not focus on inequality but understand at an early age that equal treatment and equal opportunities should be fundamental in our society.

View and perspective

Creating equal opportunities is seen as something that can best be created through a change in perspective, through education, and not through laws and regulations. You can make policy on the topic, but that won't solve the core of the problem. It is a vision, a point of view, that needs to be addressed more deeply.

- Diversity in media, governmental bodies and the public domain will, according to young people, contribute to the change in perspective. Our diverse society must be visible.
- 'We should not write policy for the sake of writing policy. It is about a deeper problem in our society. Structural inequality' (anonymous, 20).

Join the conversation: opportunities for young people

- Lowering the voting age to 16 years; Young people want to be structurally involved in a consultative and advisory capacity by the government. In our conversations, young people gave two concrete ideas on how this could be shaped:
 1. National shadow elections (verkiezingen voor spek en bonen) elections for young people during the national elections. The votes do not officially count, but this way the government has a good idea of the views of young people.
 2. Gathering the opinion of young people on specific themes, not binding but as advice (this can be done during the national elections, but preferably structurally, a number of times a year):

INCLUSION

- A website where young people can structurally (and thematically) give their opinion;
- More young people in politics, make it more attractive and take them seriously;
- Go to schools: be visible, start the conversation.

The most important thing is feedback. Whatever choices you make, which plans you do or don't follow through, explain why.

Prejudice

As simple as it sounds, young people believe that we should not have prejudices and accept and respect everyone as they are.

Concrete proposals:

- Talk to minority groups; their experience made them experts on their own situation. They have the overview, especially when talking about how things should be done differently and where their needs lie;
- Send out surveys. Surveys are a good way to consult as many different people as possible.

Accessibility and visibility

More information should become available about WHERE and HOW you can give your opinion. Everyone has an opinion, everyone has something to say, but it is often unclear for young people where they can express it. What is needed is more transparency from policymakers: be visible, approachable and, above all, honest. Be honest about how policy has been made, what opinions may and may not have been taken into account; why certain plans can or cannot be implemented; whether there is already existing legislation for a problem – be honest and open. Make sure it is known where you can express your opinion as a young person, so that everyone has equal opportunities. Equal opportunities to participate.

CLIMATE & SUSTAINABILITY

Information and communication

Many young people believe that something must be done to combat climate change. However, information and communication about this topic is still insufficient. Although climate change concerns are widely shared at school and on social media, many young people say that they are insufficiently informed climate change solutions and what the role of the government and themselves could be in this. More information would create greater support, allowing citizens to know 'how' as well as 'why' they should change certain behaviour. It is not clear what is happening right now to combat climate change and which measures are effective. How can we, as citizens and as consumers, effectively combat climate change? And what are governments and (large) companies doing right now? Is that enough?

- 'We want more awareness, across all generations. For young people and children, a clear and practical approach is important. We see and hear a lot about climate change and many of us try to contribute to a solution, But what contributions actually work? Are my actions logical and are they effective.' (anonymous, 26)

It is up to us

Young people indicate that they see opportunities in the changing behaviour in our society. 'A better world starts with me' is something many young people firmly believe in, without being naïve regarding the limitations of this impact. Urging their parents to change their behaviour and discuss sustainability, young people already make an impact at home. Overall, young people see a great responsibility for citizens, for consumers. These include, but are not limited to: less consumption in all sectors, wearing sustainable clothing, taking shorter showers, using less air conditioning and/or heating, using solar panels, separating waste, recycling more, cleaning up rubbish outside and a climate-friendly diet.

- 'The Netherlands should show more of their actions to tackle climate change.' (Anonymous, 18)

It is up to you

Besides our personal responsibilities, young people see an important role for the government. "Sustainability is luxury, it is expensive" is something we heard multiple times. According to these young people, the government should play a more active role in combating climate change. Here, a meat and flight tax were mentioned several times, as well as green and nuclear energy. Young people indicate that there is a need for better enforcement of climate regulations. At some point, what is promised must be done. Less advice and more sanctions and penalties when agreements are not kept. Young people feel that climate goals and targets being stretched or postponed.

CLIMATE & SUSTAINABILITY

- 'Things that are better for the climate should become cheaper and things that are bad should become more expensive.' (Anonymous, 16)
- 'What is the point if I separate waste and take shorter showers, while big companies continue emitting and do not keep to agreements made?' (Anonymous, 23)
- 'You do not really see the benefits of adapting your own behavior to prevent climate change and that is demotivating. All those big companies emit a lot, the effect of our individual actions are insignificant in the bigger picture.' (Anonymous, 17)

It is up to all of us

Finally, young people see the Netherlands as being too small of a player to contribute sufficiently to the fight against climate change. This crisis does not face national borders and that is also the way it should be tackled. This requires cooperation at all levels, locally, nationally and internationally. It is up to the European Union to lead by example, only then will we be in a position to hold other countries accountable.

- Do: Make serious agreements with the whole world and otherwise, for example, punish countries that do not meet them. Do not: wait and see." (Anonymous, 19)



SELF-DEVELOPMENT

The desire to develop

Young people are keen to develop themselves in different areas. These include personal development, studying and gaining practical experience. We want to learn, discover and explore. Young people are looking for their own place in society and how to shape it to their best interest. Young people feel that current education does not prepare them well enough for the future. At school, there is a lack of opportunities to learn “skills” and practical tools for the future are not offered yet. There is a lot of focus on the subjects from the curriculum resulting to performance pressure from an early age. Privileges and inequality of opportunity lead to further concerns. Young people without homework support, tutoring, private schools and a network from home feel that they have to work harder for their future

- "You have to choose what you want to do later, far too young. I also worry now about my life later and what I will do to earn money. Currently, I do my homework at 3 a.m. because I also need to do sports and work. Moreover, I compare myself too much to other people." (Anonymous, 14)

Mental Health

Young people feel that mental health in our generation is in a terrible shape. Reasons given include: loneliness, stress, fatigue, the effects of bullying, performance pressure, and the negative effects of social media. Everything needs to be perfect. Always. You have to show a worthy life on Instagram, be funny on Snapchat, trending on TikTok and excel professionally on LinkedIn as well. Another frequently mentioned factor that plays a role in the deteriorating mental health of young people is the corona crisis. Young people have felt alone and were at home a lot, making the (un)safety at home and within the family more important.

- "I think young people have poorer mental health because they have been in lockdown for quite a long time, resulting in little or no social contact. Young people were at home a lot, which makes them more prone to depression. Also, parents were together a lot more. There have been discussions between parents, which made young people uncomfortable at home." (Anonymous, 16)

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Young people are concerned about the growing number of depressions they see and the high suicide rates in our generation. They feel that these complaints and conditions of young people are not taken seriously enough. They see that there is a lack of both individual help and collective education and information. In addition, some of the young people in secondary schools mentioned the seriousness of using drugs, smoking, vaping, nitrous oxide balloons and alcohol by (underage) young people. In conversations discussing why this was so prevalent, together with peer pressure, an "escape" from everyday life was a frequently mentioned cause.

- "Everyone carries a different backpack but there is no one without luggage" (Anonymous, 23)

Policy

Young people want policies that are based on what young people need. Not based on rules "that are just the way things are". This requires staying in dialogue with young people on topics such as: study, career, vision of the future and mental health and to act accordingly. Plummeting mental health is a regular a topic of discussion in society and in political debate. Yet there are huge waiting lists at mental health centres (in Dutch: GGZ) and young people feel that they are not resilient to today's (mental) challenges. Moreover, young people feel that politicians do not take mental health among youth seriously enough. Access to help should be facilitated and the taboo that still prevails around mental health must be fought.

- "I think that young people are not given enough opportunity to share what is going on in their lives without being judged. There is either not being listened to or the problem is downplayed and a "quick fix", superficial solution is proposed. That will not solve anything in the long run." (Anonymous, 17)

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Europe Direct Groningen - Forum Groningen
CS Vincent van Gogh, Assen
Zeven Linden College, Dedemsvaart
Europe Direct Zwolle, Stadkamer Zwolle
Etty Hillesum Lyceum - Het Vlier, Deventer
Deventer JONG
Isendoorn College, Warnsveld
Stedelijk Gymnasium, Arnhem
Presikhaaf University, Arnhem
De Lindenhof, Nijmegen
Het Werkwarenhuis, Den Bosch

And in particular: all the young people with whom we have been able to speak, with whom we have been able to exchange thoughts, and with whom, above all, we have laughed and had a good time. For us this was an experience of a lifetime.



FINAL WORD

Brussels by Bike: we consulted 826 young people, covered 4 themes, visited 9 places in the Netherlands and cycled 508 kilometres. We cycled through the Netherlands from Groningen to Den Bosch and from there on to Brussels. We went to young people to collect their dreams, visions, criticism, wishes and ideas about the future. In Brussels, and later in The Hague, we held conversations with various politicians and policymakers to share our findings. We were pleased by both young people and politicians and policymakers being open to the conversation, it just needed to be realised. The freshness, creativity and unfiltered view of young people will ensure that policies not only work now, but also have a positive influence on the future. Young people are not tied to party politics, a particular term in office or a pay check when it comes to their vision for the future. They are happy to share their vision, preferably structurally and constructively. That way it does not stop at a conversation, but people listen, talk and realise.

You do not have to give young people a voice, they have one. Find them, engage in conversations, listen and act.

TALK TO US

leahcorsmit@njr.nl

levernenijman@outlook.com

