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## Young people already know what a post-Covid world should look like

*Young people have been one of the hardest hit groups since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. But not from the obvious health point of view. They have been the hardest hit from lockdown measures. Yet they have not given up. Throughout the crisis, continuing the trend of passionate youth activism, young people have stood up for solidarity, climate action and quality jobs. As we enter 2022 – the dedicated European Year of Youth – we all have a responsibility to draw inspiration from young people’s ideas, ambitions, and aspirations to build a fairer, more sustainable, and more democratic world. The Conference on the Future of Europe is a starting point that cannot be missed – nor wasted.*

As these lines are being written, new restrictive measures are being put in place across Europe to counter the never-ending spread of Covid-19.

Saying that the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences have been a historic transformative experience for the entire world might sound like an easy take, but it’s nevertheless true. Worldwide, more than 250 million people have been infected by a disease that started making the headlines around two years ago. Tragically, 5 million of them have passed away, leaving families and communities deeply scarred across the world. The planet was put on hold (and it still is, somehow). A third of the world’s population was under lockdown rules in the early months of the pandemic and the economy faced one its largest global recessions.

In record time, the scientific community came together to develop vaccines. But while these are now universally accessible in Europe and the West, they are still not widely available in the rest of the world, especially the Global South – but opening the Pandora’s box of the vaccination debate in our societies goes way beyond the few pages I am allowed to use in this Yearbook.

So, we are still in the middle of the storm, and it is therefore difficult to say with certainty what a post-Covid Europe and world will look like. But why not try to imagine it? To do so, we need to look at the vision held by young people and youth movements across the world. ‘Build Back Better’, ‘Next Generation’, ‘Le Monde d’après’ – all these are slogans with which

we have become familiar over the two years or so. Indeed, for all the communications professionals who worked on these mottos, the obvious image to be conveyed was that of being 'new' and 'young'. 'The world is dead, long live the world' has now become the line to take. And this makes young people an obvious element in building these campaigns and plans for a post-Covid Europe and world. Young people are therefore our entry point, our drivers, and the ones to whom we should be accountable when building a new societal model for current generations and the ones to come, building on the lessons from the Covid-19 crisis, but also on the lessons from decades of increasing inequalities and global warming.

## Young people have suffered from Covid-19

To understand this vision projected from young people and how it will shape the post-Covid world, we need to look at several different aspects. The first is quite straightforward: Covid-19 itself. The relationship between young people and Covid-19 is worth exploring as it is deeply interconnected. And not always for obvious reasons.

### From a health point of view

With almost two years of scientific analysis on this deadly virus, we now have clear evidence that age and comorbidities are correlated to higher risks of severe symptoms if not death (with exceptions of course). Covid-19 has therefore often been seen as an 'old people's' disease – and young people have consequently too often labelled as the spreaders of the virus, due to their so-called 'reckless attitudes'. While no empirical data confirm that young people have been the main transmitter of the virus, studies have shown that nearly two-thirds of young people may have been affected by mental health and well-being issues during the pandemic,<sup>1</sup> due to the measures put in place by governments to counter the spread of the disease.

### From an economic point of view

Putting aside the profits made by billionaires worldwide during the pandemic, the economy has suffered greatly from the Covid-related measures taken by governments across the globe. As happened during the 2008 financial crisis, young people have often been the first to lose from the measures. In Europe, one in three young people used to work either in the wholesale or the hospitality business. As entire countries went into strict lockdown, keeping your job in a local bar or your seasonal activity in a hotel was not an option for millions of young people. In April 2020, the youth unemployment rate was four times as high as the average unemployment rate of the general population.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Moxon, D., Bacalso, C. and Şerban, A. (2021) 'Beyond the pandemic: the impact of COVID-19 on young people in Europe', European Youth Forum, Brussels.
- 2 Eurostat (2020) 'April 2020, Euro area unemployment at 7.3%, EU at 6.6%' (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10294960/3-03062020-AP-EN.pdf/b823ec2b-91af-9b2a-a61c-0-d19e30138ef>).

Young people also tend to be more often in temporary forms of work<sup>3</sup> or to be without any form of contract<sup>4</sup> (a situation that has also been deeply affected by the measures taken for Covid-19). Job security is not a fact associated with young workers, but it was very much needed in the first months of the pandemic. And to add to this precarious situation, surveys<sup>5</sup> have shown that those who had to stop working from the start of the pandemic were first and foremost young women and young people in marginalised situations.

In addition, young people who were not yet on the job market also suffered the impact of Covid-related measures. In 2020, half of university students reported a delay in the completion of their studies;<sup>6</sup> 91 per cent of school students were affected by school closures across the world;<sup>7</sup> and in most countries, a large number of young people did not have access to the necessary equipment to follow classes online.

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis and its consequences on young people has already been widely reported and analysed: young people have suffered greatly and are still doing so.

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## Solidarity, climate action and quality jobs: the next generation is now

Now that we have some basic understanding of the relationship between Covid-19 and youth, it is worth turning towards the positive aspects and focusing on how young people have been acting during the crisis, understanding what ideas they have been fighting for over the past two years as keys for the post-Covid society. We will see clearly that they define a progressive pathway. As we go deeper into our analysis, three main angles will be examined: solidarity, climate action, and the new world of work.

### Solidarity

Values first. Solidarity has been a central element throughout the crisis right from the beginning, sometimes in quite a dichotomic way. People were locked at home, but they were also standing on their balconies to support the healthcare sector and frontline workers. After every country playing solo (as health policy remains largely a national matter), the

3 Eurostat (2017) 'Temporary employment in the EU' (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20170502-1?inheritRedirect=true>).

4 Eurofound (2017) *Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report (2017 update)*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

5 Moxon, D., Bacalso, C. and Şerban, A. (2021) op cit.

6 International Labour Organization (2020) 'ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fourth edition, Updated estimates and analysis' ([www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_745963.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf)).

7 UNICEF (2020) 'Keeping the world's children learning through COVID-19' ([www.unicef.org/coronavirus/keeping-worlds-children-learning-through-covid-19](http://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/keeping-worlds-children-learning-through-covid-19)).

European Union started to get its acts together and we began to see cross-border transfers of patients and ultimately the historic decision to borrow together to fund the recovery. People saw others as a threat, but at the same time rediscovered the importance of maintaining social contact among family, friends, and communities.

The vaccination response is also an interesting challenge from a solidarity point of view. The scientific community across the world worked together and fast – with an unprecedented amount of information sharing and collaboration – to develop efficient vaccines (thanks to decades of public investment in research and development at European and national levels). However, we are now facing new variants of the virus, and other pandemic-related developments, because the majority of vaccine doses are being hoarded by the Western world, leaving billions of people elsewhere with no protection.

In the early days of the crisis, former president of the European Commission Jacques Delors warned us that the “the lack of European solidarity [...] is putting the European Union in mortal danger”. This can obviously be applied globally too.

Young people were accused – often wrongly – of not showing solidarity in the face of the virus. However, from the early days, young people and youth organisations were in reality often at the forefront of solidarity actions.

In many local communities, volunteer groups such as the Scouts, organised themselves to take food and help to the most vulnerable, very often old, people. Many youth groups, for example in Austria, put together easy-to-understand information packs in an accessible language for those in their communities who were struggling to understand the various (and often obscure) governmental instructions. As the world shifted towards the digital sphere, student organisations developed materials to understand and master the use of the avalanche of digital tools that entered our lives. Given that many young people were isolated, with their mental health suffering as a result, the National Youth Council organised ‘Solidarity Conversations’,<sup>8</sup> in Ireland for example, to keep people together and to share how they were experiencing the pandemic. Furthermore, looking beyond the immediate, the European Students Union undertook a review of human rights violations during the first months of lockdowns and the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>9</sup> These initiatives are testament to the deeply rooted commitment to solidarity that has been held among young people from the outset of the pandemic.

As we work to define the rules of a post-Covid society, we see that solidarity is one essential component, a fundamental and underlying principle that should structure our rules. The de facto solidarity which has underpinned the European project since its early days needs to become the compass for our action. We need to ensure solidarity between world regions, looking into the question of debt. We need to ensure solidarity between EU member states, building on the common borrowing of the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument. We need to ensure solidarity among regions, strengthening our cohesion policy.

8 National Youth Council of Ireland (2020) ‘Me, myself, and COVID-19’ ([www.youth.ie/event/me-myself-and-covid-19/2020-05-13/](http://www.youth.ie/event/me-myself-and-covid-19/2020-05-13/)).

9 European Students Union (2020) ‘European Students’ Union review of human rights violations during the COVID-19 pandemic’ ([www.esu-online.org/?policy=european-students-union-review-of-human-rights-violations-during-the-covid-19-pandemic](http://www.esu-online.org/?policy=european-students-union-review-of-human-rights-violations-during-the-covid-19-pandemic)).

We need to ensure solidarity between rich and poor, ending tax evasion once and for all, and instead fighting for tax justice, building on the first step made at OECD level. We need to ensure solidarity between gender, generations, and any form of background in order to create the fair and caring society that we require as we work our way out of the pandemic. Solidarity must be the way forward to build back better.

### Climate action

In March 2020, as most of the population was stuck at home, many of us probably saw viral pictures on social media about the waters of Venice becoming clearer due the reduction in boat activity on the canals. Studies<sup>10</sup> have shown that due to travel restrictions and diminished activity in cities (where most of the world population lives), the quality of air improved significantly (according to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, 11,000 pollution-related deaths were avoided in April 2020). Many scientists have also explained the link between the degradation of our ecosystems and the spread of new viruses such as that at the origin of Covid-19. These few examples among many are proof of the strong interconnection between the Covid-19 crisis and the ongoing climate crisis.

While awareness of the climate crisis and a determination to fight it has long been present in the work of progressive forces, the release of the IPCC report in August 2021 disturbed the 'Covid-free' (or at least somehow free) holidays many Europeans were enjoying that summer. The report sadly coincided with real-time impact of climate change on our regions: floods and forest fires were wreaking havoc across Europe, devastating our villages, and leaving many victims in their trail. The findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were "code red for humanity", to quote the secretary-general of the United Nations, António Guterres. The human influence in climate warming was clearly recognised (finally), the timeline was becoming exceedingly tight, and the signs of more extreme environmental events to come were highlighted as evident. The call for action was again made clear.

Unless you have cut yourself out of the news cycle over the past years or have stopped walking in the streets of your town on Fridays, you will know that the fight for climate change is the fight of young people. According to recent Eurobarometer surveys, "protecting the environment and fighting climate change" is young people's biggest concern when it comes to what the European Union's priority should be. Inspired by the climate strike of Greta Thunberg, the 'Youth for Climate' and 'Fridays for Future' movements have brought millions of young people onto the streets demanding more action from governments. Beyond the powerful demonstrations shown in the news, youth organisations have actually been working in this field for years, providing support in their communities and raising awareness of the importance of this paradigm change. Climate action is the fight of a generation – and for the ones to come.

10 Sharifi, A. and Khavarian-Garmsir, A. R. (2020) 'The COVID-19 pandemic: impacts on cities and major lessons for urban planning, design, and management', *Science of The Total Environment*, Vol. 749, December.

Fortunately (though maybe too late already), some major political initiatives to ensure the green transformation of our societies were already underway before the Covid-19 crisis hit. The European Green Deal, led by Executive Vice-President of the European Commission and progressive leader Frans Timmermans, was the first of its kind to be approved, providing a holistic plan to transform all sectors of our society in order to make it carbon neutral by 2050 and leave no one behind. As governments designed their recovery plans to address the impact of the pandemic, the European Union ensured that the green transition formed the first pillar of the Recovery and Resilience Facility. It is encouraging to see that the target for climate spending was increased in the EU (39.9 per cent vs 37 per cent). On the other side of the Atlantic, the recent adoption of the infrastructure bill by President Joe Biden is another sign of large structural change being undertaken by governments to adapt our societies and infrastructure to the challenge of the environmental transformation.

Unfortunately, despite the magnitude of the efforts being undertaken in Europe and some other major economies in the world (such as the US, but also Japan and South Korea), it is not enough to answer to the urgency highlighted in the IPCC report of last summer. So far, the world is not on track to meet the objectives set by the 2015 Paris agreement, and global warming will exceed 2°C over the course of this century (with the consequences of which we are all aware). The recent COP26 in Glasgow did not answer the expectations of many, due to the limitations of such international gatherings and slow negotiation procedures.

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One of the great challenges of the green transition is deeply linked to the principle of solidarity. Indeed, climate change is rooted in a triple inequality: richer people produce more greenhouse gases, poorer people suffer more from the impact of pollution, and access to environmentally friendly life choices is not available to the poorest people.<sup>11</sup>

It is therefore essential that we bring the question of solidarity and fairness into the great environmental transformation we are undertaking. The European Union is leading the way by making just transition a central component of its Green Deal, ensuring that the transition to a green economy does not create more division in society, but that it rather becomes a collective effort of bringing people together, increasing their well-being. The current young generation is paving the way for the green transition while being rooted in solidarity.

11 Alvarado, F., Chancel L., Piketty, T., Saez, E. and Zucman, G. (eds) (2018) *Rapport sur les inégalités mondiales*, Paris: Seuil.

## The new world of work

We can all remember our first weeks of remote working when the pandemic struck. Adjusting the screen and battling with overwhelmed wi-fi while at the same time dealing with household chores (with children around for many), struggling with the new dynamics of online relationships (both in private and professional contexts), taking advantage of a more flexible schedule (and discovering that not moving from one's house seemed endless): all these situations have now become routine. Of course, many jobs did not fit into the remote working reality: care services, food and goods provision, infrastructure maintenance, hospitality businesses are many areas of work among others that just could not be done at home. You therefore either had to go and fight with the all-pervading virus, or your job was simply put on hold if not simply disposed of.

The Covid-19 crisis has acted as an accelerator for the introduction of remote working in various fields of the labour market. It has also highlighted the importance of having proper working conditions, clear communication, social security, and space to accommodate care, illness, and other personal matters.

We highlighted earlier the impact of the crisis on youth unemployment, and we know how much the working realities of millions of people have been affected. Yet Covid-19 has actually just underlined the ongoing trends in the world of work that were already happening before the outbreak. Just as it has done with the lack of solidarity and the lack of sufficient action to address climate change, the pandemic has acted as a magnifying glass on the challenges for the future of work.

Again here, young people have been ahead of the curve. Indeed, for years now, young people have entered the labour market (or have tried to do so – given that since the 2008 financial crisis they have been the first to be laid off) while challenging the status quo and the understanding of 'what work is' – and has been for decades if not centuries. Searching for purpose, challenging established practices, denouncing discrimination and harassment, young people are demanding a future for work that is inclusive and geared towards individual and societal well-being.

A study<sup>12</sup> has highlighted the challenges young people face in the current labour market: gaining access to it, transitioning from education to employment, discrimination, a lack of quality jobs, dealing with non-standard forms of employment, gaining access to social protection, and encountering outdated labour legislation. In opposition to neoliberal reform attempts of the labour market, young people look at these challenges not with hope to reinforce corporate profit and increase efficiency at all costs, but rather with hope to find a way to improve well-being, be fruitful for society and address the issues of our times.

**Young people are demanding a future for work that is inclusive and geared towards individual and societal well-being**

12 Sanallah, N. (2018) 'The future of work and youth', European Youth Forum, Brussels.

As we try to define a new societal model emerging from this pandemic, we have the opportunity to answer the concerns of young people by: ensuring the rights skills (especially in view of the green and digital transformation), strengthening social protection and guaranteeing fair pay (addressing the new realities of platform workers, improving collective bargaining, pre-empting the demographic change coupled with an ageing population in Europe, and – because it is high time – banning unpaid internships), improving well-being at work (ensuring work-life balance, creating support structures for various needs such as care duties, and protecting privacy in an increasingly digitalised work environment), taking into account environmental concerns (as millions of jobs depend on a healthy ecosystem and millions of others depend on destroying it), and ensuring equality at work.

In its response to several of these concerns, the European Union is progressing. In 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights was announced, setting in stone a series of principles including in the fields of education, gender equality, employment, work-life balance, social protection, and healthcare. A year into the Covid crisis, under the leadership of the Portuguese government and European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights Nicolas Schmit, the European Pillar of Social Rights was turned into a concrete action plan in the fields of employment, training, and the fight against poverty and social exclusion. At the Porto Summit in 2021, a clear commitment was made to “take measures to improve the functioning of labour markets so that they contribute to sustainable economic growth, international competitiveness, foster decent working conditions and fair

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pay for all, and promote the integration of women, young people and vulnerable categories in the labour market”. All are parts of the large and complex puzzle of measures to be put into place to answer the concerns that are raised by young people and echoed by millions of other citizens in Europe. Further initiatives are still in the making, such as individual learning accounts, minimum income, the regulation of platform workers, and the protection of workers’ data in the digital field.

Exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, many issues in our current work model have shown their limit and call for a transformation of the nature and value of work. The future of work is not a fate that is imposed on us. The ambition and vision of young people in this regard should drive the change in the coming years. The world of tomorrow will be founded on new values of work, which care about people, our planet, and society.



## 2022 and beyond with young people's ideas

This non-exhaustive panorama of ideas championed by young people and the overall youth movement should serve as inspiration and a compass for progressive action.

Since May 2021, the European Union has been engaged in a new democratic experiment: the Conference on the Future of Europe. As a first attempt to create a culture of participatory democracy at EU level, this conference has the objective (or the ambition – or the challenge) of putting forward a series of ideas for the future of the European project. Covering a wide range of themes – such as climate change, health, democracy, or the place of Europe in the world – the conference has given young people a central role, ensuring a youth quota in the European Citizens Panels and giving space to youth organisations in its proceedings (for example, the conference dedicated a whole event to young people in October 2021, which led to a report feeding the work of the conference).

The conference also offers a digital platform where any citizen can put forward ideas or promote events relevant to the debate. While the digital platform faces the same limitations as any digital democratic engagement has so far (a limited diversity of participants), it is worth noting that the most popular ideas recall those we have discussed in this chapter of the *Progressive Yearbook*: with more social Europe and climate action, citizens want a society orientated towards well-being (see for example the Second Interim Report from September 2021).

In her speech on the State of the Union in September 2021, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced that 2022 would be the European Year of Youth. With a preliminary agreement now in place between the EU institutions, this special year should “honour and support the generation that has sacrificed the most during the pandemic”, “encourage all young people, especially [those] with fewer opportunities”, as well as “promote opportunities” and “draw inspiration from the actions, vision and insights of young people to further strengthen and invigorate the common EU project”.

This is good and it offers much potential. But we need, of course, to avoid falling into any tokenistic trap where young people are used for PR purposes by the European Commission. The fourth point mentioned above is the line taken by this chapter of the *Progressive Yearbook*: drawing inspiration from young people's ideas. Young people have been the champions of progressive ideas and attitudes for years, and the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted many challenges and reasons to transform our societies profoundly.

As we enter 2022, we should take our responsibility to draw on this inspiration from young people. The Covid-19 crisis has created deep scars in our societies – but giving up is not an option. There are many political battles on the table that will need ambition and vision for them to be won: from minimum wages to implementing the Green Deal, and from protecting democracy to improving the work-life balance. As we enter 2022, we should fight for the post-Covid world of which young people dream and for which they have been calling since before the pandemic began. As we enter 2022, we should all be young.