**Intersessional Seminar on Youth and Human Rights**

**12 April 2021**

Dear Excellencies, dear all, it’s a great pleasure to take part in today’s debate around mainstreaming youth rights and discuss possible next steps with you.

While youth has gained traction at the UN level, for example in the context of youth, peace and security, or in connection to the SDGs, much more can and should be done within the human rights pillar, to ensure that youth rights are given the attention they deserve.

Far too many young people face obstacles in their path towards independence. And when age is paired with other personal characteristics, these barriers tend to increase, and accessing rights becomes even more difficult. But how can this be when we have a whole international human rights system that exists to protect everyone, including youth? Unfortunately, young people still struggle to be recognised as rights holders.

Indeed, whenever we speak of youth as a group in need of specific protection, we’re often told that we should just make use of what’s already available and mainstream youth in existing mechanisms, rather than calling for anything new. As I will explain, however, this approach has yet to pay off.

As the largest platform of youth organisations in Europe, for several years now, we’ve been supporting our members to mainstream youth rights, by drafting submissions and alternative reports, and organising missions to Geneva to highlight the challenges and discrimination that young people face.

Since 2015, we’ve worked with our member organisations on 13 UPR submissions; and 3 alternative reports towards Treaty Bodies, with 2 more currently being drafted. This has resulted in some positive successes, as some of our calls were included in the final recommendations issued towards Member States.

But while this brief overview may seem encouraging, behind the scenes, the obstacles are many.

First of all, the UN Human Rights system tends to be inaccessible and often far too complex for the capacity of youth organisations. Financial barriers play a role too when it comes to organising costly advocacy missions to Geneva, as resources are scarce. As a result, despite our best efforts to provide capacity building and financial support, engagement remains limited.

But even when we do get involved, the second key obstacle is the actual impact of mainstreaming.

Still too few recommendations address youth specifically. For example, throughout all 3 cycles of the UPR, there have been less than 400 recommendations on youth (out of almost 80.000), amounting to just 0.4% of all recommendations. Across the whole UN human rights system, only 0.9% out of the almost 183.000 recommendations and observations made by all mechanisms concern youth.

Given these numbers, it won’t come as a surprise to you that, to us, mainstreaming can only be part of the solution and it cannot remain a one-way process.

My veryfirst recommendation is that, for youth rights to be more visible, mainstreaming must become truly systematic and be seen as a shared responsibility: not only by youth-led organisations, but also by UN human rights mechanisms and Member States. Youth cannot be left alone to advocate for themselves, institutional stakeholders have an equally crucial role to play.

Our members tell us that Member States don’t always meaningfully involve youth organisations in consultations to prepare national reports. This must change. At UN level, Special Procedures should be more proactive in reaching out to youth representatives during their country visits. And Treaty Bodies should increase their efforts to address youth-specific questions and include youth issues in their Concluding Observations.

And yet, mainstreaming remains a plan B, a process that we continue to rely on for lack of more specific protection. If we truly want to deliver for youth, then we need to go beyond mainstreaming, and think creatively about additional options.

Over the years, we held events and consultations both with our members and other regional youth platforms, and the message has always been crystal clear.

Our main recommendation remains to work towards a legally binding, international convention on the rights of young people, accompanied by a monitoring mechanism. Precedents at regional level exist, and international human rights law offers plenty of examples where the barriers faced by other groups were recognised, and their rights protected in legally binding conventions. So why not do the same for youth? For this process to be inclusive, and to achieve a text that is progressive and truly addresses the challenges that young people face, youth representatives must be meaningfully involved as equal partners.

As much as we would like to see a convention being adopted in the not too far away future, there are some other steps that can be taken.

A Special Procedure on youth rights, for example, would be an excellent way forward. We’ve heard the argument that this isn’t the right solution, given the excellent work being done by the UN Youth Envoy. To us, this view is short-sighted: while crucial, the Envoy’s mandate is different from that of a Special Procedure, which would focus exclusively on youth rights. Both roles can coexist, complement each other and work together for youth rights.

Aside from a convention and a Special Procedure, another intermediate step would be for the Human Rights Council to establish an open ended working group, with the participation of youth representatives. The working group could develop a non-binding international instrument, such as rules or standards on youth rights, that could result in positive change. At a later stage, a Special Procedure could be set up to assess Member States’ progress in implementing these rules or standards,

If implemented, these measures would significantly increase the level of protection granted to youth and empower young people to claim their rights.

The past year has shown how crises disproportionately impact youth. This is because, when it comes to accessing their rights, young people are in a disadvantaged position, and that makes them much more vulnerable. We saw it in 2008, we’re witnessing it again now. How many crises do we need to go through to prove that youth rights deserve specific protection?

Today, we look at Member States and the Human Rights Council, and call on you to do more, and do better. I hope that our discussion and recommendations will help move the debate forward to ensure that the human rights system does not fail young people.

Thank you very much for your attention.