



**Youth delegation at the Caritas Europa
Regional Conference 2022**

Introduction

Since 2016, Caritas Europa has taken several big steps to develop a youth engagement movement among its membership. Giving a platform to young people during the most important events of the network like the Regional Conferences, supporting grassroots initiatives on youth engagement, creating structures working on the topic on a strategic level – i.e. the Caritas Europa Youth Engagement Working Group, creating the position of youth officer in the secretariat, dedicating funds for youth work, and setting up dedicated social media channels have borne fruit and youth engagement is increasingly mainstreamed in Caritas Europa. Both on paper, within the new Strategic Framework, and in practice, as the example of the Regional Conference 2022 showed.

This short report presents the next step taken, that is, having a youth delegation attend the Regional Conference 2022 in Athens. The report aims at sharing with the network the outcomes of the discussions that the youth delegates had during the Conference, and their meaning for the whole event, but also outlines propositions for the next steps the Caritas network should take.

Background: the challenges of forming a youth delegation

The Youth Engagement Working Group, with the support of the Youth Engagement Officer, were responsible for defining who the youth delegates will be and what will be their role at the Regional Conference 2022. While members of the Working Group wished that young people themselves (meaning young volunteers, project participants and service users under 35 years old) will become delegates, this idea turned out to be more challenging than initially assumed. First of all, there is a big distance between youth at the grassroots level and Caritas directors or presidents who are the main participants at Regional Conferences. It is not evident for the latter to see young people as participants in a decision-making event. Additionally, it is challenging for young people to meaningfully participate in such events. It requires knowledge of the Caritas Europa network, its structures and working methodology. Many young people engage in Caritas temporarily and do not have opportunities to learn more about Caritas at the European level to gain the necessary capacities to participate in events like the Regional Conference. Therefore, the Youth Engagement Working Group members concluded

that it would not be possible to ensure meaningful and true participation of young people themselves at the Regional Conference 2022. Nevertheless, it still was a perfect opportunity to openly discuss these challenges and look for solutions with youth coordinators and relevant contact points. Additionally, there still was a possibility to engage young volunteers and ensure that the voice and perspective of Caritas staff working on youth engagement is present during the thematic sessions of the Conference. Thus, it served the aim of mainstreaming youth engagement as stated in the Caritas Europa Strategic Framework.

In the end, a group of 27 participants, 23 youth delegates and 4 Caritas identity resources persons interested in youth engagement, participated in the youth sessions. Among the youth delegates, there were also members of the Youth Engagement Working Group and the Caritas Internationalis Youth Committee. Overall, 19 member organisations were represented. The youth participants present at the Conference serve in Caritas in various roles – they are either young volunteers or youth contact points or coordinators of youth projects and programmes. There were also young Caritas employees already serving in leadership roles.

Role of the youth delegation

The youth delegates participated in the Regional Conference in mainly two roles:

1. They participated fully in the three thematic sessions during which they reflected on the Caritas vision 2030. The main goal of their participation in these sessions was to ensure that the perspective of young people and youth staff were included in the discussions and their outcomes. Strengthening youth engagement in Caritas Europa turned out to be the main outcome of these sessions (for more details, see thematic sessions report). This was not only due to the contributions of youth participants, but also due to the recognition of all Regional Conference participants of the important role youth can play in the network.
2. The youth delegates participated in three side-sessions on meaningful youth participation that took place during the statutory sessions. These sessions aimed at working out propositions for ensuring meaningful youth participation in Caritas Europa structures and future Regional Conferences.

In addition to these two roles, youth delegates participated in joint celebrations, which allowed them to develop relationships with other youth as well as with Caritas directors, presidents and other participants. Many of the youth delegates participated also in the Caritas identity workshop, which allowed them to contribute to the discussion on how Caritas identity could be understood and communicated to the internal and external audiences.

Aims of the youth delegation

Having a youth delegation during the Caritas Europa Regional Conference 2022 aimed at:

- Creating space for youth to contribute to the Caritas vision 2030;
- Elaborating solutions for ensuring meaningful youth participation within Caritas Europa structures;
- Strengthening youth engagement as part of Caritas identity and giving youth engagement visibility;
- Mainstreaming youth engagement – incorporating it into the regular programme of Caritas Europa;
- Ensuring space for exchange on youth engagement within the highest decision-making body of Caritas Europa and for advocating for further development of Young Caritas Europa;
- Listening to the voice of young people and Caritas staff working with youth.

Each of these aims was achieved during the event:

- Delegates hugely contributed to the thematic sessions by engaging in discussions with Caritas directors, presidents and Caritas identity resource persons. In the final voting, the theme “Involvement of youth and women” had the biggest number of votes – 53 (see thematic sessions report).
- Many Caritas directors and presidents appreciated the opportunity to spend time and exchange with youth and youth contact points present at the Conference.
- During the youth sessions, youth delegates fruitfully engaged in a discussion on meaningful youth participation in Caritas Europa and worked out recommendations for the next steps. Their voice and needs in this regard were listened to.
- Youth delegates were visible and present throughout the whole event, which allows for a more meaningful presence in future events and contributes to the mainstreaming of youth engagement.

Nevertheless, there were still some areas where the topic of youth engagement could have been more present. A presentation on youth engagement or a speech by youth representatives could have been included in the statutory sessions and official opening or closing of the event.

Programme and outcomes of the youth sessions

The programme of the youth sessions was focused on three aspects:

1. Networking, which was very much needed and appreciated after two years of pandemic. It was also a great opportunity to learn how youth participation functions in different countries.
2. Coming to a common understanding of what meaningful youth participation means based on the experiences of participants and the concept of the Participation Ladder. The aim of this discussion was to understand how the Young Caritas Europa movement should define its goals in this field in order to come up with proper solutions.
3. Exploring solutions for ensuring meaningful youth participation in Caritas Europa that would serve both member organisations and the whole network.

Re. 1. Based on a lively exchange, the participants of the youth sessions learned that youth participation in Caritas Europa member organisations presented at the Regional Conference functions in the following way:

- In the majority of cases, young people engaged in Caritas have an influence on projects in which they are involved. They can propose their ideas, discuss Caritas projects and have an impact on how they are implemented. Some member organisations have specific channels or structures dedicated to listening to the perspective of young people.
- In some cases, youth contribute a lot to the communication activities of member organisations. This is considered their area of expertise.
- In the majority of cases, young people do not participate in the decision-making bodies of Caritas organisations. Nevertheless, several member organisations have in place solutions or opportunities for youth to be engaged in Caritas in a more meaningful manner: through creating structures working on youth engagement, having it as a cross-cutting theme in the strategy, having youth on the Executive Board or hiring young people for leadership positions.

Re. 2. Participants of the youth sessions understand meaningful youth participation in the following way:

- Creating a flexible learning community that shares authentic experiences and ensures continuity;
- Youth presence and autonomy throughout the whole project;
- Empowering youth and ensuring opportunities for networking;
- Access to funds and investment;
- Participation in all Caritas structures - youth being present at all levels.

Re. 3. The main discussion during the youth sessions was focused on how to put the vision presented above into practice in the Caritas Europa network. One of the most important conclusions was that in order to ensure meaningful youth participation, the confederation needs to work on strengthening enabling conditions and factors for that. In this respect, three main aspects should be taken into consideration:

1. **Improving communication between the European level, national structures and youth at grassroots level.** The big distance between these levels or the idea of being out of scope kept coming back and will definitely motivate the Youth Engagement Working Group to keep developing communications on Young Caritas Europa. Additionally, the need to improve communication between Caritas directors and youth staff and young volunteers was raised during the discussions. In order to address this challenge, Caritas leaders need to be continually encouraged to get more interested in Young Caritas.
2. **Providing regular meeting opportunities.** The Regional Conference was a great moment to meet and inspire each other. Its young Caritas participants found this opportunity motivating to keep developing the youth movement in their countries and underlined the need to keep providing this kind of opportunities as they strengthen the youth's feeling of belonging to Caritas and allow to build contacts on a European level.
3. **Strengthening capacities of youth engaged in Caritas.** The aim is to empower young people to let them feel that they are experts in many fields, not only in youth-related ones, and to whose voices we need to listen in each area of the Caritas mission.

The Caritas Europa secretariat and the Youth Engagement Working Group are working on all of these three areas; but certainly, there are still many next steps to be taken. Nevertheless, the youth delegates concluded that, while the confederation is on its way towards improved enabling conditions, it is worth already creating structures for young people themselves (meaning youth contributing to the Caritas mission by volunteering, campaigning, participating in Caritas projects or using Caritas services), which will allow them to participate in Caritas on a European level. The positive experience of the *ad experimentum* Youth Representative in the Executive Board should encourage the creation of a similar position for youth engaging in Caritas as opposed to youth employed by Caritas. The youth delegates discussed various solutions like a Youth Council whose representative could join events like the Regional Conference and present the youth's perspective or young volunteers joining already existing structures like the Youth Engagement Working Group.

Overall, below are the youth delegates' proposals for developing meaningful youth participation in Caritas Europa, in order from the most important to the least:

1. Organising youth exchanges;
2. Creating structures for youth participation on a European level (like Youth Council or ensuring presence of young volunteers in the Youth Engagement Working Group);
3. Appointing youth representatives to national Caritas Boards of Directors;
4. Developing enabling conditions;
5. Reaching Caritas decision-makers on a national level;
6. Creating a youth training programme;
7. Developing talent management opportunities.

All these proposals and outcomes from the discussions of the youth delegates will be analysed and followed up by the Youth Engagement Working Group.

Closing

Having a youth delegation during the Caritas Europa Regional Conference 2022 seems to have been a success. Members of the delegation appreciated greatly the opportunity to meet, exchange, learn about other young Caritas groups in Europe and discuss a common vision of youth participation in Caritas. They had a big impact on the thematic sessions, contributing to the creation of the Caritas vision 2030. Statutory participants of the Conference enjoyed the opportunity to meet with youth and youth staff from the grassroots level and to listen to their perspectives. During the youth sessions, the youth delegates together with the Youth Engagement Working Group created a joint vision of next steps for better participation of youth in Caritas Europa. With this new energy and motivation, all participants of the Conference are looking forward to the further development of the Young Caritas Europa movement.



Rue de la Charité 43
1210 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 (0)2 280 02 80
info@caritas.eu
www.caritas.eu