

Alternative Progress Report

Youth sector in Albania

and negotiation process for EU Integration 2023



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1. Introduction

Young people play a crucial role in Albania's development, and their participation in the decision-making process is critical to guaranteeing a sustainable and successful future. As the largest demographic group, with over 22%¹ of the population, young people (15 to 29 years of age) are the driving force behind social, economic, and political change. They have the potential to make significant contributions to society, including driving innovation, advancing technology, and creating new jobs.

Furthermore, young people have a unique perspective on the challenges their communities are facing and are often the most affected by them. To guarantee that policies and plans reflect their needs and ambitions, it is crucial that their opinions and ideas are heard during the decision-making process.

In this setting, youth have taken on a transformative role in the life of the country, impacting a variety of societal facets like social welfare, employment, education, and health. The importance of young people's participation in the decision-making process cannot be overstated, as their ideas, energy, and enthusiasm can drive social and economic progress, leading to a brighter future for all and especially regarding the process Albania's integration into the European Union (EU).

EU integration aspirations resonate deeply within the hearts and minds of the younger generation in Albania. This pursuit goes beyond the mere alignment of political, economic, and legal systems with EU standards; it represents a vision of a brighter future, replete with opportunities, stability, and democratic values. At its core, this paper delves into the profound expectations of Albanian youngsters regarding the EU integration process and the essential reforms that accompany it.

Albania's journey towards EU integration has spanned two decades, marked by complex challenges, steadfast commitment, and continuous adaptation. A significant facet of this endeavour is the Structured Dialogue mechanism, a vital platform for engaging various stakeholders in shaping the country's path towards EU membership. In this paper, we explore the nexus between the Structured Dialogue mechanism and the expectations of young Albanians regarding the EU integration process. Our exploration unfolds in distinct layers as follows.

Current Developments in Negotiation Chapters 19, 26, and 27: We begin by analysing the evolving landscape within these negotiation chapters, delving into legal adaptations, assessing political investments, and gauging civic engagement. These chapters include areas of vital importance, encompassing social policy, education, culture, and the environment, where alignment with EU standards is essential.

Civic Engagement and Youth Participation: The paper explores the potential for civic engagement, with a particular focus on young Albanians. We examine how they can not only contribute meaningfully to the political process but also enable positive change in their country. We confront the challenges that hinder their participation and explore the prospects of empowering them as catalysts for transformation.

Applying the Structured Dialogue Mechanism: Amidst the backdrop of the "bilateral pre-negotiation process," we contemplate how the Structured Dialogue mechanism can be harnessed to facilitate a more robust and inclusive exchange between Albanian youngsters and policymakers. This mechanism, originally designed for engaging youth in policy dialogue, can be an invaluable tool for aligning their expectations with political realities.

Structured Dialogue and New Methodology of the EU Integration Process: the Structured Dialogue mechanism is a continuous process aimed at securing political outcomes. Among other relevant stakeholders in each phase, National Working Groups made up of representatives from the National Youth Council (a public entity formed by the Ministry of Youth and its national agencies) conduct consultations with young people and policymakers at the national level, and at the local and regional levels whenever possible. A first introduction of the concept has already been developed and a possible scenario

1 INSTAT, Institute of Statistics Albania, 2021. <https://www.instat.gov.al/al/statistika-zyrtare-femije-dhe-te-rinj/popull-sia/t%C3%AB-rinj-15-29-vje%C3%A7-n%C3%AB-raport-me-popullsin%C3%AB/>.

has been created to implement it in the Albanian context. The aim of the follow-up step is to identify in these three chapters (Chapter 19: Social policy and employment, Chapter 26: Education and culture, and Chapter 27 Environment) a thread that specifically deals with the role of young people transversally, providing a concrete contribution to Albania's EU integration.

Throughout this paper, in our quest to understand the multifaceted nature of Albania's journey towards the EU, we have integrated passages from interviews with key stakeholders. Their voices, aspirations, and concerns are woven into the fabric of our analysis, providing concrete perspectives on the EU integration process for youth involvement.

This paper concludes with a set of recommendations addressing the challenges and harnessing the opportunities presented by the expectations of Albanian youth. These recommendations are rooted in the belief that the alignment of youthful optimism with a practical and political process is not only possible but indispensable for Albania's future within the EU.

There is a lack of transparent and approachable sources of information in regard of the work progress related to EU chapters, civils society inclusion and youth inclusion specifically, in the consultative councils based on each Ministry.

It should also be underlined that in preparing this paper, many informative meetings, moments of exchange, and reflection were held with contacts and representatives of numerous national and international institutions and organizations on the local, national, and regional (Western Balkan) levels. These experts, representatives, and staff have provided valid contributions to this paper but preferred not to be mentioned through individual quotes given their work positions.

- *EU Commission*
- *EU Delegation in Tirana*
- *Prime Minister's Office*
- *Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)*
- *Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)*
- *Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*
- *Ministry of Education and Sport*
- *Ministry of Health and Social Protection*
- *Minister of Youth and Children*
- *Ministry of Finance and Economy*
- *Western Balkan Fund*
- *Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI)*

2. Current development of negotiation chapters 19, 26, and 27, covering legal adaptation, political investment, and civic engagement

The EU Integration process is important, demanding and yet often not clearly explain to the population overall as it comes with many challenges and it involves many fronts, economic, political, and social. The process is inevitably impacted by the population's perception of the political class and its historical momentum since the whole process is focused on adapting legislation.

To follow the logic of this process, it is necessary to understand the social context, in our case the role of young people and the Albanian narrative and perception. Their voices and ideas are critical in the decision-making process to ensure that policies and strategies reflect their needs and aspirations.

The EU negotiations are part of a process that brings two aspects, the technical and the political, to the macro level. As it is mostly a technical process, youngsters are not often included, except for those working in related institutions. The work takes place over different phases and the relationship between the technical and political part on one side and the citizens on the other creates the optics of a division, like two parts separated from each other. The complexity of the technical issues has led to ambiguities which, consequently, have been interpreted by citizens as a lack of transparency and/or a lack of inclusiveness.

Although young people cannot be considered as a separate community, they are often excluded. However, they constitute an essential part of the country and must be seen as its future potential. Starting from this premise, it is difficult to identify which negotiation chapters have young people at their centre. All the chapters see them involved to varying degrees, but when being selective and directing attention the sectors most involving the youth, we have identified chapters 19, 26, and 27.

Identifying the spaces of the negotiation process that involve young people means understanding the methodological framework and how the negotiation process evolves; we thus need to go through the EU Commission's new approach to the EU Integration process. The results of various ministries joint consultations are collected in a national report, which is then sent to Albanian Parliament, the Prime Minister's Office, and other institutions in charge of specific topics.

According to the INSTAT study on "Youth in Albania: Challenges in changing times" of 2015, "the general picture that emerges from available data is that Albanian youth experience – and notably bring about – societal change. In several areas, considerable improvement can be observed, although generally the living conditions of Albanian youth falls behind most of their European peers. Particularly worrisome is the position of youth in the labour market, which is also the basic factor in large-scale emigration from Albania and its population decline."

In addition, according to the EC Progress Report for Albania of 2016 with reference to Chapter 26: Education and culture, "Albania adopted the pre-university education strategy and started implementing the law on higher education. However, the quality of education needs to be evaluated and improved, especially since emigration by young, skilled people is high while job opportunities are lower."

The above-described and current landscape of youth in Albania demands above all youth involvement in policy making. Such involvement would be greater if the model of inclusion of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the negotiations structures is adopted. However, if CSOs are still not included in the negotiation's structures, there will always be the possibility to involve professional organizations and experts in certain areas to be engaged in the work of individual negotiating groups to resolve certain complex issues related to the Negotiation Team tasks.

Negotiations are based on the principle of merit as well as a good approach to legislative changes and their implementation. Consequently, the speed of the negotiations will depend on the progress Albania makes in fulfilling its membership obligations. However, the developments and perceptions of some EU member countries have shown that the pace of the enlargement process, in order not to undermine the cohesion and effectiveness of the EU's internal policies, will also vary. Regarding the scope of EU principles, the following elements must also be taken into consideration in carrying out this process; although they do not directly concern this research, they should still be considered.

- *An important principle is that of “conditionality,” otherwise known as the “carrot and stick” principle. During the negotiation process, Albania will receive concrete benefits if it advances with reforms, but on the other hand, if these reforms stagnate or degrade, the European Union will undertake sanctions.*
- *“Fundamental principles” are the first to be considered. The main chapter series will be the first to be opened and the last to be closed and the progress or lack of progress will also affect the opening of other chapter series, thus affecting the entire negotiation process.*

The negotiating structure in Albania was established in 2019 with Decision of the Council of Ministers (VKM) No. 749. The highest body of the negotiating structure is the State Committee for European Integration. This body evaluates and coordinates the negotiating position for each group of chapters before sending it to the Council of Ministers for approval. It consists of the Prime Minister, the Head of the State Delegation, the Chief Negotiator, the ministers responsible for internal affairs, economy, finance, and justice, the Secretary General of the Council of Ministers, as well as the minister covering the field or the heads of independent institutions, according to the topic of discussion for each chapter of the *acquis*.

The state structure that represents Albania at the Intergovernmental Conference Albania - European Union, within the framework of the accession negotiations to the European Union, is the State Delegation. The State Delegation consists of a) the minister responsible for foreign affairs, in the function of the chairman; b) the chief negotiator, in the function of the deputy chairman; c) the Head of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Albania to the European Union; d) representatives of ministries and other central institutions, depending on the field of responsibility, which is the subject of discussion with the institutions of the European Union.

The technical negotiation process for each chapter and group of chapters is prepared by the Inter-institutional Working Groups under the direction of the ministries or institutions covering the relevant areas of the *acquis*. For each chapter or several chapters, a negotiator is assigned, and all negotiators headed by the Chief Negotiator make up what is called the Negotiating Group. The negotiating group was created by VKM 422/2020². This negotiation structure is also assisted by the Secretariat of European Integration³ and by the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Albania to the European Union⁴.

2 Decision No. 422, dated 6.5.2020 “On the composition, rules of operation and financial treatment of the Negotiating Group and the duties of the Chief Negotiator for the development of negotiations on the accession of the Republic of Albania to the European Union”.

3 The Secretariat of European Integration (Secretariat) consists of diplomatic and civil servants of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and functions under the ministry responsible for foreign affairs.

4 The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Albania to the European Union is responsible for a) supporting diplomatic and technical communication with the institutions of the European Union and with the member states of the European Union; b) the organization of the agenda of the meetings and the exchange of the respective positions of the parties on the issues discussed within the negotiations for each chapter of the *acquis* of the European Union.

Chapter 19: Social policy and employment (Cluster 3)

The primary objective of this chapter is to ensure that Albania meets the EU's social policy and employment standards. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection is responsible for the implementation of related policies and regulations. The Screening Process Expert Group reconfirmed the observations and recommendations of the EU Commission according to which Albania needs to implement significant reforms to improve employment policies, social protection, labour standards, and gender equality to meet EU standards.

According to the Screening Report (dated 20.07.2023), the Albanian labour market has shown significant improvement, with higher workforce participation rates and a reduced gender participation gap, both of which are nearing EU-28 averages (reaching 74.8% and narrowing by 11 percentage points in 2022 compared to 2011). Simultaneously, unemployment and inactivity rates have decreased. However, the youth unemployment rate, although lower than in the previous report, still indicates inadequate support for young individuals transitioning into the workforce.

Efforts have been made to restructure and enhance employment offices, expand active labour market policies along with their connection to social assistance opportunities, and reduce informal labour. Despite these improvements, gaps remain in the quality and availability of public services designed to aid the unemployed, ensure safety standards, and regulate informal labour. Additionally, there are concerns about career options and educational content available to young individuals. Ongoing reforms targeting vocational education and training (VET) and the promotion of digital skills are addressing this challenge. However, these initiatives suffer from insufficient funding and slow implementation. Also, migration has driven a reduction in the working-age population and is exacerbating shortages of skilled labour, especially the young people which are needed to drive Albania's transition toward a more advanced, higher productivity, economy.

Given such recommendations, it remains indisputable that main stakeholders (central and local institution, private sector, and civil society) need to closely collaborate in order to implement reforms rooted in the priorities and needs of young people, reducing brain drain and youth migration, giving a boost to healthcare, manufacturing, agriculture and above all tourism services.

To meet the EU's social policy and employment standards, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection needs to invest in youth employment, improve social welfare policies, and address the informal economy. The ministry needs to provide training and retraining for the unemployed, promote employment, and ensure equal opportunities in employment. The ministry also needs to improve social welfare policies to better protect vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and people with disabilities. Furthermore, the ministry needs to address the informal economy through policies that promote formal employment and reduce informal employment.

Most ministers are part of the National Internship Program (paid internships up to 6 months) at the end of which, depending on performance, several of them are hired. This has led to much student employment, and the Excellence Program, which has integrated high performing students immediately in the workforce for more than 7 years and then according to DCM No. 586 (dated 30.08.2019, On the temporary employment of excellent students in public administration).

Albania has a certain level of preparation for social policies and employment, continuing with the restructuring of employment policies, as well as the revision of legislation on education, vocational training, and employment promotion. For occupational health and safety, progress has been made with the adoption of most legislation covering the EU Framework Directive. A new policy framework should be developed and adopted based on a gap analysis and in line with the upcoming EU OSH Strategy 2022-2027.

Bilateral social dialogue remains fragile in both the private and public sectors, mainly due to the insufficient experience of trade unions, the lack of a culture of dialogue, as well as employers' scepticism towards trade unions. Underemployment and informality remain problematic and strong efforts are needed to align education policies with the needs of the labour market. Local social care services are underdeveloped, there is a lack of investment and adequate human resources in many municipalities. According to municipal

social services data, social care coverage is extremely low compared to EU rates, with only around 16,054 beneficiaries in 2020 (0.57% of the population).

Regarding the issue of trade unions, even if there is no shortage of curricula in vocational training schools, there is a broad lack of representation of young people, a phenomenon which is rampant throughout the country and which has created the view that unions are inefficient and directed by old figures who represent the interests of entrepreneurs rather than the workers.

As a result, young people show no interest in being members of trade unions. In recent years there have been constant symbolic contributions by some international foundations operating in Albania⁵ that work to make young people aware of the importance of trade unions and workers' rights. These contributions have shown that young people are interested in contributing to trade unions and could make a breakthrough in the protection of workers' rights, leading to improved working conditions, and making the labour market more equitable and sustainable.

Furthermore, it is fair to mention that Albania has made progress, followed EU recommendations, and changing the Labour Code, where issues such as health and safety at work, non-discrimination, relations between employers and employees have been harmonized with EU law, but there is still much work to be done on issues such as social protection and employment.

The main challenge is the further development of the country's human resources, in training, competences, and qualifications in accordance with the needs of the labour market. Improving access and quality in education and professional training of young people and adults should be linked to the objectives of economic and regional development. Health and social services and infrastructure in support of groups in need, especially minorities and other groups (such as persons with disabilities), are insufficient.

The institutions responsible for the implementation of reforms in the field of social policies and employment are the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, dependent institutions such as the State Social Service, the Labour Inspectorate, the National Employment Service, line ministries, ministerial working groups, and inter-ministerial, institutional, and inter-institutional organizations. Albania has been assessed as having made some progress on this chapter in each report of the European Commission, from 2016 to 2022.

Chapter 26: Education and culture (Cluster 3)

This chapter addresses the alignment of Albania's education and cultural policies with EU standards and principles, with the goal of promoting harmonization and cooperation between Albania and EU member states. Tasks and objectives likely include reforms and initiatives aimed at improving the quality of education, enhancing cultural cooperation, and fostering mutual understanding between Albania and the EU. These efforts are intended to align Albania's education and cultural practices with those of the EU.

Each sector includes a target group of the most influenced population and young people are present, who are directly involved in education and training programs. The primary beneficiaries of this sector are an integral part of society, expressing oneself culturally on multiple levels in creativity and art, understood as essential to a proactive identity.

This chapter consists of:

- *Education and training*
- *Education and professional training*
- *Culture*
- *Youth and sport*

Education and training

According to the Commission Staff Working Document Albania 2022 Report, Albania has achieved a moderate level of readiness in education and culture, marked by some significant progress. The adoption of the 2021-2026 National Strategy for Education, along with its action plan, is a commendable step forward. Notable developments include strengthening the new National Agency for Employment and Skills, revamping the National Agency for Education, Vocational Training and Qualifications, and rolling out the Albanian Qualification Framework alongside the Vocational Education and Training Law. Despite these advances, further efforts are essential to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of education. Key areas of focus should be the effective implementation of a competence-based approach and the integration of digital technologies in educational processes. It is also crucial to allocate sufficient resources to ensure the successful implementation of these new policy reforms. In addition to educational advancements, there is an urgent need to enforce the Law on Cultural Heritage and Museums to preserve and promote Albania's cultural assets.⁶

In terms of education, Albania has made some progress in aligning its policies with EU standards. The country has adopted a new Law on Higher Education, which aims to improve the quality of higher education and promote academic freedom. The law also establishes a quality assurance agency to oversee the implementation of quality standards in higher education institutions. Albania has also made progress in implementing the Bologna Process, which aims to create a harmonized European higher education area.

The National Education Strategy for the period 2021–2026 is centred on enacting and adjusting a fresh curriculum. This curriculum involves making English a mandatory subject along with introducing software coding and ICT skills starting from the first year of primary education. Albania has a plan to enhance school quality, envisioning the establishment of libraries, laboratories, and “smart labs” in all schools by 2026. The country also aims to introduce compulsory, lifelong teacher training, and to provide training for more English and ICT teachers.

In the upcoming year, Albania should focus on several key tasks:

- *Enhancing the VET system to align services and skills with labour market requirements.*
- *Enhancing the professional development and training of educators and trainers, especially concentrating on pedagogical skills that relate to implementing the inclusive, competence-based approach and digitalization across all education levels, from pre-primary to university, including VET education.*

6 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2022_en

Education and professional training

Regarding VET, the full implementation of the 2017 VET Law is still pending, and the enactment of legislation concerning providers financial independence remains outstanding. The government has taken steps to strengthen the structure of VET institutions by enhancing the National Agency for Employment and Skills. The process of restructuring the National Agency for VET and Qualifications has also been ongoing, with the addition of more personnel to facilitate continued professional development. However, additional endeavours are required to complete the staffing arrangements for both agencies in relation to VET, enhance the quality assurance framework, and bolster the central level's functions for planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

The endorsed Optimization Plan for VET providers in 2020 is still pending execution. Albania needs to adopt legislation that outlines the organization, functions, and operations of VET providers, along with regulations pertaining to their financial independence. The complete implementation of this plan by 2023 is crucial for streamlining and modernizing the offerings in Vocational Education and Training (VET). In 2021, 66 VET instructors underwent training in "basic didactics," which encompassed pedagogical methods, assessment techniques, soft skills, and digital proficiency. This marked an increase from 22 teachers trained in 2020.

Additional training in 2022 and 2023 is necessary to effectively introduce digital education and ensure that educators possess the digital skills required for online teaching in the VET domain. Despite promotional endeavours and targeted assistance to students from rural areas in pursuing VET studies, the participation rate remains low. Only 17.7% of upper secondary students were enrolled in vocational schools in 2021 (18,279 students out of 103,467), which is a decrease of 0.5 percentage points compared to the previous year. An inter-ministerial work group is working to increase the number of students enrolled. (Delina Ibrahimaj, State Minister of Finance and Economy)

In the education and vocational training, it is worth mentioning the incentives from the Ministry of Youth regarding coding bootcamps starting from early classes in schools and monetary incentives for students which want to follow the path of ICT and coding.

Culture

According to the Commission Staff Working Document Albania 2022 Report, Albania benefits significantly from its participation in the global Erasmus+ program. This initiative is particularly crucial for the four Western Balkan countries, including Albania, that are not directly associated with the program. Through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance III (IPA), dedicated financial support amounting to EUR 374 million has been allocated for the period 2021-2027. This funding is instrumental to bolstering Albania's educational and cultural exchanges under the Erasmus+ framework."

Throughout 2021, the ministry took steps to enact legislation that pertains to the establishment and management of a database for stolen cultural assets, as well as rules governing the oversight and evaluation of organizations entrusted with cultural assets. From June to December 2021, a total of 108 projects, under the categories Art and Exhibitions, Performance and Theatre, Cultural Education, Conservation and Restoration, Literature and Publications, Film and Multimedia, Cultural Heritage and Traditions, International Collaborations and Exchanges, were successfully executed.

In March 2022, Albania solidified its cultural commitment by ratifying its participation in the EU Creative Europe program, spanning 2021 to 2027. This move aligns with the ongoing implementation of Albania's national cultural strategy for 2019-2025, which prioritizes cultural education for children and youth, the expansion of creative industries in music and dramaturgy, and the enhancement of international cultural collaborations.

Further aligning with European Union standards, Albania has demonstrated progress in its cultural policies. Notably, the country has enacted a new Law on Cultural Heritage, aiming to safeguard and preserve its cultural heritage sites. Additionally, Albania has developed a comprehensive national strategy for cultural development. This strategy is designed to promote cultural diversity and expand public access to cultural events and activities, thereby enriching the cultural experience within the country.

Youth and sport

Since the release of the last report of the European Commission, in 2022, the National Youth Strategy 2022-2029 has been published. Regarding strengthening the legislation, there is moderate progress, as in the last 2 years, the Youth Law has also been joined by by-laws, making it more readable and concrete. After this initial period, difficult due to the implementation of the law, especially the establishment of the Youth Representative Body and making it operational, there is a need to make an overall assessment and draw some conclusions that should be presented in the form of recommendations for the forthcoming improvement of the law.

Despite the improvement of Law no. 75/2019 "On Youth," which provides the legal basis for drafting policies and strategic programs for youth, the Minister of State for Youth and Children, in cooperation with the members of the inter-ministerial working group, drafted the National Youth Strategy 2022-2029, as well as its Action Plan.

The National Youth Strategy 2022-2029 represents a significant milestone in Albania's policy development, marking the first comprehensive strategy focused exclusively on youth. This strategic document is designed to integrate national youth policies, addressing multifaceted challenges faced by young people today. These challenges include their involvement in decision-making processes, employment, education, and engagement with technology and innovation. Additionally, the strategy emphasizes enhancing activities in the arts and crafts sector, promoting increased participation in sports, and encouraging volunteering among youth.

Aligned with the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027, this national strategy underscores a strong commitment to prioritizing youth, education, and the recognition of their talents and demands. The successful implementation, monitoring, and achievement of this strategy's objectives are pivotal. It is crucial to establish effective mechanisms for these processes to ensure that the strategy's goals are met and that it yields tangible benefits for the youth of Albania.

Furthermore, Albania maintains an active involvement in EU initiatives, with a notable presence in programs such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. Beyond the institutional aspect, we see a marked improvement in the participation of young people within civil society, or rather, a growing capacity for collaboration and cooperation between young people and civil society.

Thanks to an ambitious program, notable work by the National Youth Congress (an umbrella composed of more than 14 entities, including youth organizations, informal groups, and youth forums of the main political parties) in collaboration with the Municipality of Tirana, competed and won the title European Youth Capital 2022. This not only gave the direct grand funding for more than 400 projects with direct beneficiaries of young people but has transformed Tirana into a place where dozens of European activities and projects have been held, sending a clear message to the Commission on how important European integration is for Albania and the Western Balkans.

The implementation of the macro-program, the leitmotiv of this title, has demonstrated not only to Albania, but above all to Europe, that the networks of youth organizations have high importance for making policies come live and be implemented in the best possible way, helping to make them tangible and concrete. The National Youth Congress of Albania and the Municipality of Tirana have shown great maturity in collaborating and taking the necessary steps together to achieve excellent results.

In addition to the collaboration between the National Youth Council and the Municipality of Tirana, the financial contribution of the Albanian Government must also be recognized here, which has allocated a fund dedicated to this title, demonstrating its maturity and its desire to give priority to young people.

In conclusion, Albania has made some progress in aligning its education and cultural policies with EU standards, but there are still some challenges that need to be addressed. The country needs to focus on improving the quality of education at all levels, increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups in education, improving the management and protection of cultural heritage sites, and increasing public awareness and participation in cultural events and activities.

Chapter 27: Environment and climate change (Cluster 4)

This chapter aims to ensure that Albania aligns its environmental policies with EU standards and values, with a focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainable development. Albania has made some progress in aligning its policies with EU standards. The country has adopted a new Law on Environmental Protection, which aims to improve the management and protection of natural resources, including water, air, and soil. Albania has also developed a national strategy for climate change, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote renewable energy.

In the sectors of transportation and trans-European networks, Albania exhibits a foundational level of preparedness. However, progress in these critical areas has been constrained. To advance further, there is an imperative need for ongoing efforts, particularly in addressing flag state control issues and in the harmonization of national legislation with European standards.

Moreover, environmental protection demands heightened attention. Key areas for improvement include enhancing Albania's waste management systems and implementing measures to reduce air pollution in urban areas. Furthermore, the country's capacity for monitoring and enforcing environmental regulations requires significant strengthening. Developing these areas is essential not only for Albania's compliance with international environmental standards but also for sustainable national development.

In terms of climate change, Albania needs to increase its efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, particularly in the transportation and energy sectors. The country also needs to increase its use of renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar power. The imperative of addressing climate change involves strengthening policies for transitioning to a greener economy, promoting sustainable hydropower generation, and ensuring sustainable connectivity. These priorities are pivotal for economic integration within the region and with the European Union. These aspects are closely tied to Albania's Economic Reform Program, the Commission's Economic and Investment Plan, and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

Environment and climate change have become the main objective of the EU to bring about change in the modern economy and society. Climate change is the greatest challenge of our time and is an opportunity to build a new economic model. To overcome these challenges, the European Green Deal will transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy, ensuring: a) no net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050; b) economic growth not dependent on the use of natural resources; c) no person and no country left behind. For the EU, the European Green Deal is the means of salvation from the COVID-19 pandemic. A third of the €1.8 trillion investment from the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan and the EU's seven-year budget will fund the European Green Deal.

According to the Commission Staff Working Document Albania 2022 Report, in its alignment with the EU acquis, Albania has shown a commendable degree of preparation, especially in water management, chemicals regulation, and combating environmental crime. Significant progress is also evident in civil protection, setting the stage for Albania's forthcoming participation in the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Despite these advancements, there remains a need for continued enhancement of the civil protection system, particularly in terms of implementation and enforcement capabilities.

According to the Commission Staff Working Document Albania 2022 Report, areas requiring substantial efforts include waste management, improving water and air quality, and addressing climate change. The effective implementation of Albania's climate law will largely depend on the development of supporting by-laws, regulations, and measures, which fall under the purview of the Minister for the Environment. A critical challenge in this regard is the absence of dedicated administrative structures and specialized personnel to address climate change issues. Addressing this gap is imperative for Albania to effectively respond to climatic challenges and align with international environmental standards.

In all sectors that affect the environment, Albania needs to adapt the legislation and draft policies that are in line with the directives of the European Union. Although efforts have been made in this direction, Albania faces various challenges and needs to invest more in human capacities and in the punishment of environmental crime. The construction of incinerators

is a concern related to the acquis for the priority that waste recycling should have. Air and water pollution requires that more work be done in the direction of the approximation of legislation and the drafting of policies, especially in the part of monitoring these sources.

Further steps are necessary to align with air quality regulations, enhance the air monitoring system, and address issues with waste management. The construction of a new incinerator in Tirana raises concerns regarding compliance with EU waste regulations, including waste hierarchy and recycling targets. Albania should embrace a circular economy approach and encourage waste prevention, reduction, and recycling, particularly composting, while hastening the implementation of waste stream legislation.

Although progress has been made in aligning with the Habitats and Birds Directives, issues such as strategic investment legislation's impact on biodiversity and the Vloja Airport construction within the Narta Protected Area need to be addressed. The government's actions to protect the Vjosa River, declaring it protected area showed positive will to go further on environmental improvements policies. Steps should also be taken to enforce forest and logging laws, prevent wildlife crimes, and enhance capacity for inspection and prevention of such offenses.

Albania has made some progress in aligning its environmental policies with EU standards, but there are still some challenges that need to be addressed. The country needs to focus on improving its waste management system, reducing air pollution in urban areas, and increasing its capacity to monitor and enforce environmental regulations. Additionally, Albania needs to increase its efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote renewable energy sources to combat climate change.

This summary underscores the significant efforts undertaken and the remaining tasks in this crucial chapter. Beyond the technical aspects, it is imperative to emphasize the need for a broader understanding and engagement among the population, particularly the youth. Young people increasingly view environmental sustainability and Earth's health as not just a current priority but a critical concern for the near future.

Considering this, it is recommended that each component of this chapter be complemented by a comprehensive national information and awareness campaign. Such a campaign should be implemented on a national scale, leveraging the vital contributions of central and local public institutions. Furthermore, collaboration with the private sector and civil society is essential to ensure a wide-reaching and impactful campaign. This approach will foster greater public awareness and active participation in environmental and sustainability issues, aligning with the strategic goals outlined in this policy paper.

Conclusions

1. Chapter 19: Employment Policies and Social Affairs: This chapter deals with the issues of employment, vocational training, and social policies. One of the main challenges for Albania is youth unemployment and the integration of young people into the labour market.

Key points:

- *Creation of job opportunities for young people.*
- *Professional training programs in line with the needs of the labour market.*
- *Development of welfare systems that support young people in the transition from training to work.*

2. Chapter 26: Education and Culture: Education and culture are essential for socio-economic development and European integration. The connection with chapter 19 is manifested in the importance of training as a tool to combat youth unemployment.

Key points:

- *Reform of the education system to bring it more in line with European standards.*
- *Promotion of higher education and vocational education.*
- *Enhancement of cultural heritage and promotion of culture as a tool for integration.*

3. Chapter 27: Environment and Climate Change: Climate change is a global challenge. Young people are particularly sensitive to these issues and are often at the forefront of environmental initiatives.

Key points:

- *Promotion of environmental education in schools.*
- *Encouraging youth participation in environmental initiatives.*
- *Development of policies for the fight against climate change, with a particular focus on youth engagement.*
- *Improve cross-sectoral cooperation*

Finally, training and employment are closely linked: a solid education system aligned with the needs of the labour market will help reduce youth unemployment. Similarly, raising young people's awareness of environmental issues through education can help them become active and aware citizens capable of facing the challenges of climate change.

Recommendations

- Integrate vocational training programs with the needs of the labour market.
- Invest in environmental education programs and encourage youth participation in environmental initiatives.
- Promote culture and education as tools of integration and sustainable development.

3. A deeper look into how youth civic engagement could be increased and meaningfully tailored to political processes, challenges, and prospects.

Defining political participation and civic engagement for youth

Young people are affected by an array of decisions on local, national, and global socio-political and economic matters. The EU integration process is one of those matters where Albanian youth are influenced and affected and thus, they should be meaningfully involved. Political participation has received considerable attention and is a widely contested term. As W. van Deth (2001) explains, the study of political participation in the last years mostly reflects citizen engagement in democratic decision-making processes (see Figure 1. ABC from “Studying Political Participation: Towards a Theory of Everything”, Jan W. van Deth, 2001), which provides a detailed definition of political participation largely focus on citizen activities seeking to influence political decisions through individual actions, their role as citizens, civic participation, and social movements.

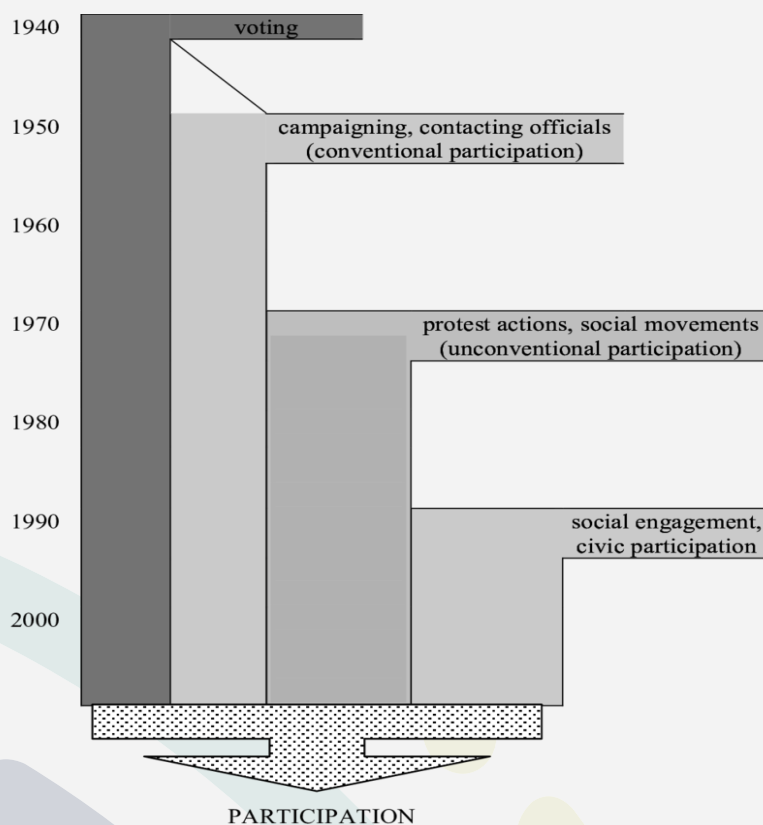


Figure 1. ABC. From “Studying Political Participation: Towards a Theory of Everything”

by Jan W. van Deth, 2001

The Council of Europe employs a more specific definition of youth political participation in the same vein, “Political participation is any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere.” (EU Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2020).

Given these definitions, youth civic engagement is a multifaceted concept that involves young people participating in various political activities, such as voting, volunteering, community organizing and advocating for political issues. It includes both traditional forms of political participation such as voting and running for office, as well as non-traditional

activities such as community service, activism, and advocacy for social, political, and economic issues.

Furthermore, formal, and informal youth civic spaces offer safe and open environments in which their participation is fostered (Richards-Schuster and Dobbie 2011). On another note, a growing body of literature suggests that there are both conventional and unconventional forms of participation in politics and political processes. In the latter youth exhibit more interest and see participation demonstrated in a form of lifestyle politics. (Pitti, 2018)

When speaking about increased and meaningful youth participation tailored to the political process, challenges and prospects, the most common aspects considered key to defining meaningful youth participation include: up-to-date information and communication from relevant institutions and stakeholders, provision of ownerships, authority and voice to youth, full inclusion in decision-making processes and finally, sustainable and efficient long-term provision of material and non-material support. (Bárta, Boldt, and Lavizzari, EU Council Research, 2021).

Youth civic engagement in EU Integration Processes

The process of EU integration in Albania involves various political, economic, and social reforms to align with the EU standards and regulations whereas among the stakeholders involved, young people should act as a key actor. Their civic engagement and participation play a crucial role in shaping sustainable and time-bound policies and reforms.

Active youth involvement is essential for shaping Albania's path towards European integration, given also that young people make up the largest part of the large population in the country and have an important role to play in the development and settlement of various reforms and policies for social, cultural, and economic progress. However, youth participation and civic engagement in Albania has been highly influenced and dominated by many factors, such as the lack of open and safe spaces for the inclusion of youth, lack of information and education or awareness raising on the importance of civic engagement, and the lack of political mechanisms that bring young people closer to governmental institutions.

Albanian youth have struggled to make their way into political participation for several reasons related to Albania's democratic transition and beyond. They have not been properly involved due to lack of mechanisms ensuring their inclusive representation in decision-making processes in the country, loyalty to a specific political party or political polarization, and lack of hope and trust in governmental agencies and ministries. (Shehu, Ozcan and Shehu, 2013, pp. 559-567)

Another considerable aspect towards what keeps Albanian youth disengaged in politics have also been problems related to the high rate of unemployment and the high level of informality in the labour market, which create economic inequalities and marginalized youth unable to participate in activities related to political processes of economic and social development of the country.

The ongoing engagement of the National Youth Congress across Albania with youth of diverse backgrounds has showed that lack of economic opportunities to engage in social and extracurricular informal education has kept youth disengaged and not informed on the EU integration process of the county (Peci, Nikolli; NYC Albania research, 2019)

In addition, there has been a lack of proper local planning in the development of youth policies, and uncoordinated priorities or mechanisms with other relevant institutions or youth actors in the civil society. The lack of budget allocation specifically for strategic objectives both at the central and local level makes it more difficult to invest in long-term and sustainable opportunities for youth to engage.

Youth activism and engagement has continued to implement an ad hoc style, which does not entirely match the needs and interests of youth or even reaches out to them. There is an urgent need for the governmental institutions and actors at the local and national levels as well as the international community to find mechanisms that orient them better towards

the needs and interests of young people, as well as to implement Structured Dialogue and a comprehensive consultative process before the implementation or design of a new national plan and priorities related to the EU integration process.

What can severely impact the EU Integration process is the apathy that youth feel towards politics and politicians and a lack of motivation to participate through traditional channels (political parties, election campaigns, voting process in political structures). The lack of economic opportunities from a competitive and fair labour market shows young people tend to engage in other fields other than politics and civic life. However, regarding Albania's EU integration, there is a positive youth energy felt in the country, which must take shape and be transformed into concrete actions through their involvement and support for the difficult reforms that often precede integration.

There must be systematic projects and initiatives to maintain the momentum and support of young people, increasing information about the EU and raising realistic expectations about what increased youth involvement and engagement in the process would look like. Young people should be encouraged and supported to act as key partners and actors by demanding the continuity and transparency of undertaken national reforms necessary for integration, but above all they should be trained and empowered with their capacities and potential through the mechanisms that the EU has made available for civic engagement in the integration process.

While this policy paper aims to address EU negotiations, specifically chapters 19, 26, and 27, the role of young people in these chapters and fields cannot be overstated.

In conclusion, the integration process is intricately entwined with the participation of young people throughout numerous chapters of the European Union integration process for Albania. The involvement of young people in these chapters goes beyond limitations. Young people take use of the possibilities offered while also taking on the duties of active citizenship, speaking up for change, and directing the country toward a future that is more cohesive, just, and sustainable.

Tailoring the Political Process for Youth Engagement

Any youth policy or initiative must view young people as a resource and should include instructions for how they will regularly participate in both its development and its implementation. (Denstad, 2009, 15). Public institutions need to change how they interact and engage with young people to encourage their engagement in public governance. They should also give them the tools they need to fully grasp their own potential as significant agents of transformation.

Youth public involvement faces several difficulties and obstacles, including, among others, a lack of enthusiasm, a lack of knowledge of the opportunities and channels for engagement, a lack of knowledge and skills, a lack of incentives, and a lack of faith in the government.

Institutionalized platforms and initiatives for communicating and meaningfully engaging with youth are frequently lacking or insufficient. Therefore, it is essential for public institutions to develop cutting-edge plans and methods to handle these issues and interact with youth more effectively. Governments should have a clear understanding of how young people interact with others and communicate to develop youth engagement strategies that are tailored to meet their needs (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Policy Brief 2023).

In Albania, various stakeholders are involved and responsible for ensuring better-tailored and more coherent political processes for youth engagement: national institutions and governmental agencies, schools and educational institutions, civil society organizations, and media. The following includes a set of recommendations and perspectives to increased and meaningfully tailored political initiatives for youth engagement:

- ***National Institutions and Governmental Agencies:*** The government, the Minister for Youth and Children and the National Youth Agency the Agency, as well as other relevant ministries which work with cross-cutting youth issues should practice

open and continuous direct consultation with young people through discussions, consultation sessions and live meetings. Institutions should encourage young people to communicate with them through making use of innovative and digital media. Furthermore, relevant institutions should also be more open towards hard to reach and vulnerable youth, and young people with limited abilities, by implementing accessible communication and providing them with relevant information. When creating new policies, specific characteristics should be considered of the youth groups and those should be treated accordingly to their needs. Lastly, political parties should ensure and address youth issues through their agendas and programs, which should also be jointly created in consultation and dialogue with youth.

- **Schools and Educational Institutions:** Through study trips, guest lectures, and interactions with local governments and national institutions, schools and educational institutions should be more open to plan and promote initiatives that introduce young people to institutions, their work, and their role in working for EU integration processes. To stimulate collaboration between young people, civil society organizations, the business community, and civil society organizations, formal educational institutions should also support non-formal education that contributes to the civic education and development of knowledge towards youth policies. Higher education institutions should also be engaged in research work and data collection on youth issues and other fields linked to the interests and needs of young people to promote the development of youth policy and the academic calibre of the debate on youth issues.
- **Civil Society Organizations and Those Working with Youth:** Young people should have access to and be able to join as new members or beneficiaries and could participate in decision-making within organizations that work with you. The needs of young people should be given top priority, and CSOs should actively oversee and monitor how institutions are putting youth-related laws and policies into practice. Furthermore, CSOs should also take the lead and aid in developing youth policies and dialogue with public and national institutions. The inclusion and equal support of young people from marginalized groups and vulnerable populations should be modelled by those working with youth and the civil society sector.
- **Media:** The media must create content that is understandable and tailored to young people in terms of form, themes, and language to inform this new audience, given that young people are underrepresented in the media. The media also needs to provide space for young people's presence in programs and another media content. Furthermore, initiatives affecting young people need to be more visible in media through reporting, having journalists focused on youth matters, producing program sections for young people, and developing research reporting on youth concerns, engaging young journalists, and other innovative techniques.

4. Apply the Structured Dialogue mechanism in the pre-negotiation process

The Structured Dialogue mechanism is a process of regular consultation and dialogue between European Union institutions and young people. The goal of this dialogue is to enable young people to participate in the EU decision-making processes regarding issues that affect them, including youth policies.

In the context of EU youth policies, Structured Dialogue provides a platform for young people to express their views and opinions on key issues such as education, employment, social inclusion, health, and participation in the development of democracy. Through this dialogue, young people can contribute to the development and implementation of EU youth policies and ensure that their needs and interests are considered.

Analysis of Structured Dialogue and youth policies at the EU level

Structured Dialogue is based on a set of principles, including transparency, openness, inclusiveness, and accountability. It involves a range of activities, such as consultations, meetings, surveys, and online discussions, and is facilitated by various stakeholders, including youth organizations, national authorities, and EU institutions.

The EU's youth policies are designed to address the needs and aspirations of young people in Europe, with a focus on promoting their active participation in society and their personal and professional development. These policies are based on a framework of shared objectives, which include improving education and training opportunities, promoting employment and social inclusion, supporting health and well-being, and enhancing democratic participation and active citizenship.

In recent years, the EU has placed greater emphasis on Structured Dialogue as a means of promoting youth participation in policymaking. This has included the establishment of a Youth Strategy for 2019-2027, which sets out a framework for engagement with young people and the development of youth policies.

The strategy includes a commitment to ensuring that young people have a voice in policymaking and that their views and opinions are considered. It also includes a focus on supporting the participation of young people from diverse backgrounds and ensuring that their needs and interests are addressed in EU youth policies.

Overall, Structured Dialogue is an important tool for promoting youth participation in policymaking at the EU level, and for ensuring that the needs and interests of young people are considered in the development and implementation of youth policies.

Analysis on the adoption of Structured Dialogue in the Albanian context

The Structured Dialogue process has been recognized as an effective tool for promoting youth participation and inclusion in policymaking at the European Union level. In recent years, several countries, including Albania, have adapted this process to their own national contexts in order to strengthen youth participation and engagement in policymaking.

In Albania, the Structured Dialogue process was established in 2015 as part of the National Youth Strategy. The process is coordinated by the National Youth Council of Albania (NYCA) and involves a range of stakeholders, including youth organizations, government officials, and civil society actors.

The Albanian Structured Dialogue process is designed to promote youth participation and inclusion in policymaking across a range of issues, including education, employment,

health, and social inclusion. It involves a series of consultations and discussions with young people, as well as the development of policy recommendations based on their input.

One of the key strengths of the Albanian Structured Dialogue process is its focus on inclusivity and diversity. The process seeks to ensure the participation of young people from diverse backgrounds, including those from marginalized communities, and to promote their views and perspectives in policymaking.

However, there are also some challenges to the adaptation of the EU Structured Dialogue process in the Albanian context. These include a lack of resources, limited capacity among youth organizations to engage effectively in policymaking processes, and a lack of political will among government officials to implement youth policy recommendations.

To address these challenges, there is a need for increased support and investment in the Structured Dialogue process in Albania. This could include providing resources and capacity-building support to youth organizations, as well as raising awareness among government officials and policymakers about the importance of youth participation and inclusion in policy making.

Overall, while there are some challenges to the adaptation of the EU Structured Dialogue process in the Albanian context, the process has the potential to be an effective tool for promoting youth participation and engagement in policymaking. With continued support and investment, the Structured Dialogue process can help to ensure that the needs and perspectives of young people are considered in the development and implementation of youth policies in Albania.

Structured Dialogue as a Tool for Negotiation and Communication: As countries move through the process of EU integration, as a tool for negotiation, Structured Dialogue provides a formal mechanism for them to discuss their progress, challenges, and concerns with the EU. Furthermore, integration requires aligning national policies with EU standards. Structured Dialogue facilitates discussions about these policies, allowing candidate countries to better understand requirements and adapt accordingly. In all of this, young people have a prominent role, since they can make concrete contributions to their vision of the Union and its values, as they are an important part of the population which deserves to have a strong voice within the process and because they will be the leaders of European society in the coming decades.

Structured Dialogue extends in a line from the different milestones as follows.

- **Policy Harmonization:** Integration requires aligning national policies with EU standards. Structured Dialogue facilitates discussions about these policies, allowing candidate countries to better understand requirements and adapt accordingly.
- **Trust Building:** Regular dialogue promotes transparency and trust between the EU and candidate countries. This mutual trust is crucial for successful integration, especially considering the long-term commitments involved.
- **Addressing Sensitive Issues:** Some areas of the integration process, such as human rights or judicial reforms, can be sensitive. Structured Dialogue offers a formal, diplomatic platform to address these concerns, making it easier to understand and to find common ground and solutions.
- **Feedback Mechanism:** The EU can provide feedback to candidate countries on their performance and readiness for accession. This helps the countries in question to prioritize reforms and make necessary changes.
- **Engaging Civil Society:** Structured Dialogue is not limited to governmental entities. It should be considered an instrument and methodology for civil society, which plays a pivotal role in the EU integration process, and according to the scope of this paper, for Albanian youth. By involving a wider range of stakeholders, the dialogue becomes richer and more comprehensive.

The Structured Dialogue is an indispensable tool in the EU integration process. It offers a platform for constructive conversation, negotiation, and feedback, ensuring that the integration process is transparent, inclusive, and effective. As countries aim to join the EU, this dialogue facilitates their journey, ensuring they are well-aligned with EU values and standards. Albania's European integration process, as mentioned in the first part of this paper, is structured through a series of chapters spanning different sectors and themes. Chapters 19, 26 and 27, dealing respectively with employment and social affairs, education and culture, and environment and climate change policies, are particularly relevant to youth policies.

5. Recommendations

- *Youth Involvement and Empowerment: Actively involve and empower young Albanians in the EU integration process. This can be achieved through transparent dialogue, education, and programs that promote entrepreneurship and civic engagement. Initiatives should aim to build trust and meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes, making sure to include young people from diverse backgrounds and marginalized groups.*
- *Inclusive Approaches and Civil Society Engagement: Foster transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in political processes. Enhance youth participation through the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs), youth networks, and organizations. A stronger partnership between policymakers and the CSO sector is crucial to amplify the impact of state programs and advocate for the interests of young people.*
- *Addressing Economic and Social Inequalities: Address socio-economic disparities, youth unemployment, and inclusion through structural efforts. This includes outreach activities in disadvantaged communities, creating youth employment opportunities, and promoting digital inclusion. Such efforts will allow for better inclusion and empowerment of young people in the EU integration process.*
- *Promoting European Values: Raise awareness of European values among young people. This can be achieved through EU mobility programs and educational initiatives. Stakeholders working directly with the EU integration process should involve young people at all stages of the integration process to build trust and support, thereby countering apathy and emigration. To address “enlargement fatigue” and boost trust and support, the EU should include young people not just as beneficiaries in the future but also as active participants in shaping EU policies and programs today.*
- *Local Involvement and Inclusive Policies: Combat the challenges of “state capture” by involving local government units, small businesses, and civil society organizations. Promote young Albanians’ involvement in chapters related to social policy, education, culture, and the environment, which can accelerate progress and make policies more inclusive and representative.*

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