



AMPLIFY PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE!

Recommendations for policy and practice¹

Participation “is widely regarded as an essential, if not the most important, principle of the democracies of our time. The European institutions and organisations have repeatedly emphasised the importance of participation to foster young people's active citizenship, enhance their integration and inclusion and strengthen their contribution to the development of democracy.”² When we talk about Europe today we think of the whole continent from East to West and North to South, including the 47 member states of the Council of Europe and the 28 member states of the European Union. This already reflects a large diversity in terms of policies, cultures, economies and histories. Regarding the state of democracies and the role of civil society, we consider Europe and many countries herein to be in a critical state. In a number of countries, the election results for national parliaments as well as – in the European Union - for the European Parliament revealed an increase in support for nationalist, anti-European and xenophobic parties. In addition, Europe is in a deep crisis, not only economically but also culturally and politically in terms of power relations, conflict solutions, identity, legitimacy and basic trust. There appears to be a general dissatisfaction with what is considered the “European Project” especially among young people – concerning its values as well as with the functioning of democracy. However, people want to have their say and address their dissatisfaction in various ways, either directly and frankly towards the political decision makers, or in less constructive ways. This context produces a dangerous amalgam that is gaining force in almost every country across Europe. It is therefore time to redefine and to foster the participation of citizens, particularly young people as a core principle and basic value of democratic governance in Europe.

¹ These recommendations have been drafted by an editorial group based on the results of the Multilateral Cooperation Project “Participation of young people in the democratic Europe” & of the Reflection Group on Youth Participation of the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth.

² European Knowledge Centre on Youth Policy: <http://pip-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/citizenship-participation-and-information>

1. Understand participation of young people: participation takes place in various forms and arenas!

Participation of young people takes place in political and social processes and bodies; it can be of individual or collective nature, it happens 'for real' or virtually, in urban or rural life. Young people also engage in communities, in educational environments, the labor market and public space, in their daily life, in youth care & welfare systems, in civil society structures and in cultural projects; no matter if this engagement happens in new or in old, traditional forms, young people participate massively in their daily life, not always in the ways expected by institutional and political actors.

We need to move towards a wider understanding of and a paradigm shift for 'public participation' and of what forms of participation of young people are there. Participation in all spheres of private and public life means much more than only taking part in elections.

Therefore, look outside of the ballot-box when you look for participation of young people! Particularly in terms of political participation, it is worth promoting a more contentious democracy in Europe – and seeking the open dialogue with and between young people.

What we need is:

- promoting a wider understanding of the notion of participation as a concept of experiencing public and political influence on daily-life issues;
- connecting the broader discussion about democracy today and the discourses of young people.

2. Learning to be a democratic citizen is a key factor for participation

Learning participation is a lifelong and life wide issue; therefore, holistic and inclusive learning concepts including formal, informal and non-formal learning settings help fostering participation of young people. All learning settings, various types of schools, non-formal learning, universities, youth work, communities, vocational education and training sites are concerned as well as cooperation projects between these settings. This goes hand in hand with making learning more attractive and developing democratic and participatory approaches and methodologies, such as peer learning, learning by doing / exercising / having fun, volunteering and the right to make mistakes. The learning of participation must reach out to all groups of young people, particularly to those in vulnerable situations and with fewer opportunities. The learning of participation should coincide with quality mentoring and there should be supportive structures in place to assist this learning process. The skills and competences needed for participation and learning outcomes must be defined (e.g. media literacy...) while respecting ethical and quality standards in learning objectives. There are many links to various other learning arenas such as democratic citizenship education, human rights education, intercultural education, global education which support learning participation.

What we need is:

Teaching democratic values

- Making educational settings the place where young people learn democracy and transforming them into a space of experiencing democracy;
- Reaching an internal consensus that everyone has the right to have a say and to be heard;
- Developing empathy, tolerance and pluralism, and

- Gaining motivation for active citizenship.

This approach should in a broader perspective support community cohesion: the local community is the place where all citizens, no matter of what cultural, religious or socio-economic background, sexual orientation, physical abilities, live together in the same neighbourhood – and need to get along with the space and resources given.

Life-long and life wide democracy learning

- Learning to participate in decision-making from an early age, in kindergarten, school, training, or work;
- Offering in a person's life different opportunities for public deliberation experiences (even to experience when the individual interest is not realized);
- Making real action a major part within training and workshop settings instead of merely simulating politics;
- However, active citizens need to be able to develop standpoints and negotiate them with others: simulations can help to learn about institutions and decision-making in an interactive and multi-perspective way. "Personalizing politics" by explaining what politics has to do with the individual life.

Strengthening non-formal learning and civic education as instruments to learn democracy and participation

- Encouraging providers of non-formal learning opportunities for young people, including NGOs, to meet high standards and take long-lasting actions in participatory structures and methodologies;
- Counteracting the worry that a civic education with a stronger political focus leads to indoctrination: topics within learning democracy programmes and projects should be presented controversially and in such way that a critical analysis and finding of own positioning of the young person is facilitated;
- Developing an ethical consensus/set of quality standards in each country to ensure this. The introduction of or agreement on such ethical and quality standards should be accompanied by a process to agree on such guidelines with the providers of civic education, train-the-trainer courses etc.;
- Putting civic education and NGOs in the position (e.g. by changing funding rules or providing special resources for it) to outreach to non-formal learning activities, such as courses in the meeting points of excluded target groups, public places, remote areas etc.;
- Equipping educators (both in formal and non-formal settings) with the capacities to develop and implement educational processes that encourage the learner's ability to develop motivation and competences for participation.

Winning school as a new partner

- Developing a holistic 'Education for Democracy' strategy by focusing on the identity of young people and their responsibility to engage in democracy;
- Linking youth work to curricular activities at school;
- Focusing on the support of a participatory mind-set and educational approaches in schools to strengthen students' abilities to discuss topics, to question standpoints and to find their own solutions to solve a problem;
- Overcoming the risk that schools provide experiences of anti-participation rather than being partners in supporting young people to learn participation and democratic values;

- Linking and cooperating between formal and non-formal education and increasing the connection between schools and the local community, especially for lessons and activities in social science, ethics, PSHE, environmental studies etc.
- Selecting a team of teachers and students to serve as coordinators of cooperation with the local community (e.g. to coordinate excursions to see how local parliaments function, how courts work etc.);
- Accompanying pupils and students in their learning through their participation in school structures.

Strengthening youth structures as a strong pillar of civil society

Strengthening youth structures means to support youth NGO's and youth initiatives as well as public structures who are offering support to young people such as youth clubs, youth information and counselling services etc. Young people are to be encouraged, invited and attracted to participate in these structures and must be made aware of their added value. Debates and dialogue with young people have to be organised and a critical reflection on participation/policy/democracy/democratic values offered, supporting relevant communication, consultation and co-decision structures. Tools and information channels have to be developed and made available.

What we need is:

- Providing sustainable support of youth structures, which foster and qualify participation, deliver knowledge and offer training in order to foster short-term or longer-term participation;
- Providing particularly genuine, institutional and long-term support for the work of youth non-governmental organisations at all levels;
- finding innovative ways to liaise between youth political parties and political life in general, for example by organizing events and debates with young politicians within both formal and non-formal structures.

Supporting a participation-friendly environment

- making participation high profile and not a generous "nice-to-have";
- emphasizing the benefits of the participation of young people to all stakeholders in the field of youth policy, such as innovation, integration and quality improvement of political decision-making, prevention of brain drain;
- establishing dialogue formats such as intergenerational dialogue; or setting up ongoing dialogue between different social groups and politicians (accept different forms of dialogue);
- Using attractive methodologies by decision-makers and administrations to enable participation and using accessible language and forms of behavior that young people understand.

3. It takes a whole society to rear a democrat!

It is not solely the young people who have to change and "deliver" to become good democrats. A lot of young people dislike politics not because they do not know what politics is, but because they disagree with the language, the style, the way politics is made. So here is a whole set of issues that require good-will and reforms by all different stakeholders and groups.

- **Transparency and accountability:** Decision-makers should outline clear conditions and procedures for their participation processes so that everyone understands. The administration should communicate clearly when it is possible or not possible for young people to get involved within participation processes. The administration should communicate the findings and conclusions that result from youth participation processes.
- **Youth policy 360°:** Participation is key to good governance in the 21st Century. To achieve consistency and to establish 'youth mainstreaming' there should be an administration unit

on youth policy at national level, that is proportionate to the population of young people. Youth policy demands cross-sector and cross-ministerial cooperation, which needs to be strengthened to foster good participation of young people. To make participation of young people sustainable, each administration or unit at all levels should delegate responsible specialists in youth affairs. A **“Youth Check”** should be proposed for all Member States, following the Austrian example of a legal frame for checking the effects on young people for all political actions;

- **Reaching out to all young people for the participation of young people:** consider innovative and inclusive ways to reach the most vulnerable and excluded groups of young people through information and learning activities; **empowerment** should be one of the main principles for enabling strategies.
- **Training for young people to interact with institutions and training for professionals working with young people or on youth policy** to interact with young people

4. There are many good examples and approaches - make use of them!

Share and foster peer-learning on all levels (peer-learning is one acknowledged element of the EU youth strategy framework). Explore tailored tools and services and their different functions and needs (e.g. identify tools where young people engage) and share lessons learnt:

- documenting good practices in relevant databases and encourage the interconnections between formal, non-formal and informal settings for the promotion of youth participation;
- showcasing good practices during relevant (European) events;
- disseminating examples of good practice on encouraging the participation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Use mentoring and other supportive approaches to engage young people in democracy: Policy makers should create an atmosphere and sufficient resources to encourage the establishment of mentoring systems on all levels (e.g. mandate holders and politicians mentoring young leaders or people from underrepresented groups, NGOs as providers of mentoring programmes etc.). To enhance such an atmosphere we recommended to a coalition of European stakeholders to create (if not existing already) an annual day where young people can shadow decision makers to get insight into how democratic processes function and how deliberation works in practice. The title of such a day could be **“Take-over day”** (inspired by the UK). Training and debates with politicians are required to establish such mentoring schemes and to make them efficient.

Online/offline participation:

- Ensure inclusive access to information about participation opportunities through various channels combining old and new media. Rather than solely providing information through forms of new media because not everyone has access to internet;
- Media production training and media literacy training in school and out-of-school education environments need to be taught at a higher standard;
- Understanding of the skills needed (critical thinking, etc.) for effective online/offline participation and ways to cultivate them in school and out-of-school education environments;
- Developing the social campaigning and advocacy skills of young people.

5. A few things yet to know - we need a better knowledge of the participation of young people

Policy making and youth work have both taken a big step towards knowledge- and evidence-based strategies in the last decades. A better understanding of the participation of young people

and providing knowledge on it, is therefore an asset that helps shaping better policies and practice. In this regard there is a need to further support to conduct research on the participation of young people and fill knowledge gaps, to better understand the concept and forms of participation and to improve knowledge on learning approaches and their impact / effect on learners. In general terms, knowledge on the participation of young people, particularly research findings need to be provided and disseminated in an understandable manner, to policy-makers and to young people themselves.

What we need is:

- Promoting in-depth qualitative research and collection of good practices of political participation of young people to foster a better understanding of “out of the box” forms of political participation;
- Extending the definition of participation (e.g. include sub-culture elements, self-expression, unstructured ways of participation, etc.);
- Analyzing participation both in the public space and in daily life & the interaction between the two;
- Defining the scope of learning participation, the skills, learning outcomes, processes and how and whether it can be assessed;
- Examining the interconnections between learning participation with Citizenship Education, Human Rights Education, Intercultural Education, Education for Democratic Citizenship, Global Education;
- Understanding how new or alternative forms of civic engagement (e-participation, social movements, spontaneous forms of participation of young people) are interrelated and what skills are needed in the ongoing changing environment;
- Researching synergies between formal and non-formal environments for the promotion of participation.

Open up for more participation of young people!

What about a “European Youth Take-Over Day”?

**Young people would shadow decision makers and have a lively insight in politics,
open the parliaments, have a young mayor co-manage with an adult mayor,
or a youth group take over the board of an NGO...**

For just one day per year.

Everywhere in Europe.

To start with.

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