



IncludeYOU

Promoting inclusion and active participation of European Youth on decision-making processes

IncludeYOU Toolkit: Empowering Youth for Inclusive Democratic Participation

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Introduction

Purpose of the toolkit

The IncludeYOU Toolkit has been developed within the framework of the IncludeYOU project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme, as a comprehensive and practice-oriented resource designed to

respond to the growing demand for meaningful and structured youth participation in democratic life across Europe. It reflects both the priorities of European youth policy, as articulated in the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027,

and the scholarly consensus that effective participation by young people is a precondition for vibrant and inclusive democracies (Checkoway, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). The Toolkit is intended for a broad spectrum of stakeholders including young people, youth workers, educators, local authorities, policymakers, and civil society actors, each of whom plays a crucial role in fostering and sustaining youth engagement. By providing concrete methodologies, tested activities, and replicable models, the Toolkit translates the vision of youth participation into practical action that can be adapted to multiple governance levels and socio-cultural contexts.

The Toolkit addresses two essential dimensions of youth participation: conceptual understanding and practical application. From a conceptual perspective, it frames youth participation as a democratic right and a mechanism for social inclusion, while also identifying the structural and situational barriers that impede it.



These barriers manifest in multiple forms such as social barriers that include exclusion and discrimination, economic barriers such as costs of participation and unequal access to opportunities, cultural barriers such as stereotypes and limited recognition of youth voices, and digital barriers such as unequal access to digital tools or competences. By systematically analysing these challenges, the Toolkit affirms that youth participation cannot be reduced to a desirable practice or symbolic gesture but is instead a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy and a foundation for sustainable and equitable societies (Loncle et al., 2012).

From a practical perspective, the Toolkit provides a comprehensive set of methods and resources that enable stakeholders to design, implement, and evaluate meaningful youth participation processes. Its pedagogical framework emphasises active, experiential learning, offering activities such as youth-led projects, structured debates, simulations, role plays, and policy laboratories.

These methods are not only engaging but also developmental, as they allow young people to practise and refine competences that are essential for democratic participation. Critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and leadership emerge as central skills that are cultivated through these exercises. For example, simulations of parliamentary debates strengthen analytical and negotiation skills, while youth-led projects enhance initiative-taking, organisational ability, and collaborative leadership. Role plays and policy labs encourage empathy, perspective-taking, and co-creation, enabling young people to understand the complexity of policy issues and to develop solutions in dialogue with peers and decision-makers.



Checklists help organisers prepare accessible and inclusive events by guiding them through considerations of logistics, representation, and diversity. Case studies showcase examples of good practice, allowing stakeholders to draw inspiration from real experiences in different European contexts. Evaluation forms, meanwhile, ensure that participation processes are critically assessed and continuously improved, embedding a culture of accountability and learning within youth work and policymaking.

The value of these resources lies in their ability to translate the principles of inclusivity, fairness, and accountability into concrete, actionable activities that can be applied across diverse contexts. While youth participation is frequently framed as a normative goal in European and international strategies, the persistent challenge is transforming these high-level commitments into practical, day-to-day practice. Too often, policy declarations remain rhetorical, offering limited guidance on how to ensure that all young people including those from marginalized, economically disadvantaged, or digitally excluded backgrounds can participate meaningfully. The Toolkit addresses this gap by combining theoretical insights with hands-on tools, exercises, and structured methodologies, such as participatory workshops, policy labs, co-design sessions, and peer-led consultations. These practical approaches guide practitioners in designing engagement processes that are inclusive, accessible, and adaptable to the specific needs of different groups.

For example, it provides frameworks for monitoring and evaluating participation, ensuring that young people's input is not only collected but also acted upon, creating a sense of ownership and accountability. It also includes guidance on overcoming barriers such as logistical constraints, power imbalances, or cultural biases, helping facilitators create safe and supportive environments where youth feel respected and heard. By equipping stakeholders with these resources, the Toolkit enables them to move beyond abstract recognition of the importance of participation toward tangible implementation that produces measurable outcomes.

In doing so, it bridges the gap between policy rhetoric and real-world action, ensuring that youth participation is not merely aspirational but becomes a meaningful, lived experience that strengthens democratic processes, fosters civic competence, and empowers young people to actively shape the decisions that affect their lives and communities.

The practical orientation of the Toolkit ensures both flexibility and adaptability, making it relevant across a wide range of contexts. Its methods can be applied at the local level, such as within municipal youth councils, community initiatives, or school-based projects, as well as at national and European levels, where young people participate in structured dialogues with governmental institutions and policy-makers. By providing tested methodologies, practical exercises, and easily accessible resources, the Toolkit equips young people, youth workers, educators, and decision-makers with the tools necessary to design and implement high-quality, inclusive, and sustainable participation processes.

It demonstrates that meaningful engagement is achievable when supported by concrete methods, clear guidance, and structured facilitation. Moreover, it reinforces the principle that participatory democracy depends not solely on political commitment, but also on the availability of practical mechanisms that ensure youth voices are genuinely heard, respected, and acted upon. In doing so, the Toolkit bridges the gap between aspiration and practice, showing how democratic ideals can be translated into actionable processes that empower young people and strengthen governance systems.



Flexibility is a defining feature of the Toolkit that enables its use in a wide variety of contexts. At the local level it can support municipalities, schools, and youth organisations in creating youth councils, facilitating community dialogue, and ensuring that young people contribute to shaping their immediate environments. At the national level it provides guidance for institutions to institutionalise youth consultation processes, establish permanent advisory boards, and integrate youth perspectives into policymaking frameworks. At the European level the Toolkit aligns with the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the European Youth Goals, in particular Youth Goal 9 on Space and Participation for All, while also contributing to Goal 1 on Connecting EU with Youth and Goal 4 on Information and Constructive Dialogue. In this way, the Toolkit operates simultaneously as a pedagogical instrument, a policy tool, and a vehicle for transnational cooperation.

The overall purpose of the Toolkit is to equip young people and those who work with them with the knowledge, competences, and resources required to ensure that youth voices are not only heard but also acted upon in decision-making processes. Its broader ambition is to contribute to the cultivation of a democratic culture in which young people are recognised as legitimate and equal partners in shaping the future of their communities, their countries, and Europe as a whole. By embedding youth participation in democratic life, the Toolkit reinforces both the resilience of democratic systems and the agency of young citizens, thereby advancing the shared European commitment to inclusive and participatory governance.

How it connects to the Erasmus+ programme and EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027

The Toolkit makes a substantive contribution to the implementation of European Youth Goal 9, which calls for the provision of safe, inclusive, and accessible spaces where all young people can engage meaningfully in democratic and civic life. This Goal recognises that youth participation cannot be limited to symbolic attendance in meetings or decision-making forums where young people are present but lack influence. Instead, it requires the establishment of structures, mechanisms, and cultural environments that allow young people to be genuinely heard, respected, and integrated into policy processes.



The Toolkit translates this principle into practice by offering detailed guidance on how to design participatory processes that are open to all, regardless of socioeconomic background, cultural identity, or access to digital resources.

Through its comprehensive resources and structured methodologies, the Toolkit facilitates the creation of participatory spaces that move beyond tokenistic involvement, fostering genuinely meaningful engagement. It provides practical models such as youth councils, structured dialogue platforms, policy round tables, and policy laboratories, all designed to create concrete opportunities for young people to engage with decision-makers as equal partners. These platforms promote co-creation, enabling youth perspectives to be actively considered, integrated, and embedded into policy and decision-making processes at local, national, and European levels.

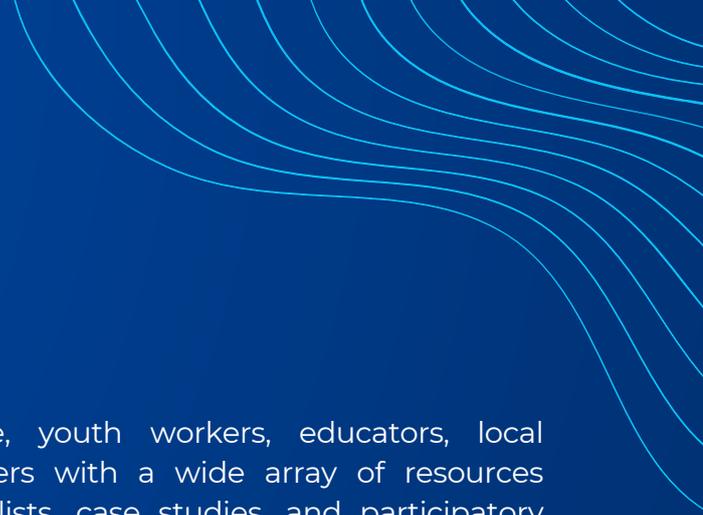
By offering guidance on facilitation, stakeholder coordination, and evaluation, the Toolkit ensures that these participatory mechanisms are not only well-designed but also sustainable, inclusive, and adaptable to different contexts. In doing so, it strengthens democratic culture by promoting inclusivity, dialogue, and collaboration, reinforcing the core values of Youth Goal 9: Space and Participation for All, and demonstrating that youth engagement is both a right and a vital contribution to responsive and resilient governance systems.

Accessibility is a central dimension of this contribution. Participation can only be considered authentic if all young people, including those facing barriers due to social, economic, cultural, or digital disadvantages, are able to take part. The Toolkit identifies strategies to address these challenges, such as providing financial support for travel and accommodation, choosing physically accessible venues, and offering materials in multiple languages or formats to meet diverse needs. It also encourages the use of digital technologies to facilitate hybrid or remote engagement, ensuring that participation opportunities extend to those who cannot attend in person. By addressing these barriers, the Toolkit works to guarantee that democratic processes are not reserved for privileged groups but instead reflect the diversity of Europe's youth.

Equally important is the emphasis on safety within participatory spaces. Safety here is understood not only as the removal of physical barriers but also as the creation of environments where young people feel respected, protected from discrimination, and empowered to express themselves freely. Psychological and emotional security are indispensable for genuine participation, as young people are unlikely to contribute openly if they fear being judged, silenced, or excluded. The Toolkit provides resources to support facilitators and organisers in fostering environments of trust and inclusion, such as methods for respectful dialogue and approaches for addressing discrimination. This emphasis on safety ensures that participation is not only possible but also meaningful and sustainable.

In practical terms, the Toolkit contributes to Youth Goal 9: Space and Participation for All by transforming abstract objectives into concrete, actionable steps.





It provides young people, youth workers, educators, local authorities, and policymakers with a wide array of resources including templates, checklists, case studies, and participatory methodologies that enable the effective design and implementation of youth engagement initiatives. By offering guidance on co-creation, facilitation, and evaluation, the Toolkit ensures that participation is not merely symbolic but meaningfully integrated into decision-making structures and policy processes. These tools help translate European Youth Goals from high-level policy commitments into tangible, lived experiences, providing young people with authentic spaces to engage, influence, and contribute to shaping policies and practices that directly affect their communities and lives.

The overarching value of the Toolkit lies in its capacity to embed inclusivity, accessibility, and safety as non-negotiable standards for youth participation. By fostering environments in which all young people regardless of social, economic, cultural, or digital background can contribute authentically and on equal terms, it strengthens the legitimacy, representativeness, and responsiveness of democratic systems. In doing so, the Toolkit not only advances the objectives of Youth Goal 9 but also reinforces a vision of Europe where young people are recognised as equal partners in shaping both the present and future of their societies.

By combining practical tools with a strong normative framework, it ensures that participation becomes both achievable and sustainable, cultivating a culture of engagement that empowers young people while strengthening democratic governance across multiple levels.

Contribution to Youth Goal #9: Space and Participation for All
Youth Goal 9 calls for ensuring that all young people have access to safe, accessible, and inclusive spaces in which they can participate meaningfully in democratic and civic processes. This goal reflects a central principle of the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027: that youth engagement is not an optional extra but a fundamental requirement for democratic legitimacy,

social inclusion, and intergenerational justice. The IncludeYOU Toolkit responds directly to this call by offering concrete and practical ways to translate the principle of inclusive participation into everyday practice. It provides tested models, adaptable methods, and replicable structures that allow stakeholders to create environments where young people are able to act not as symbolic participants but as genuine partners in shaping policies and decisions.



A key contribution of the Toolkit lies in its provision of dialogue models that bring young people and policymakers together on equal footing. These include structured dialogue platforms, youth-policy round tables, and policy labs where participants collaborate as peers. Such models are vital because they counter the long-standing perception of young people as passive recipients of policy and instead position them as active contributors whose knowledge and experiences are indispensable to effective governance. By offering step-by-step guidance for setting up and facilitating these participatory structures, the Toolkit enables local authorities, youth councils, and civil society organisations to replicate and adapt them within their own contexts. In this way, it strengthens democratic culture by embedding mechanisms of cooperation and co-creation between generations.

The Toolkit also outlines inclusive participation strategies that specifically address the barriers faced by marginalised youth. It recognises that many young people encounter multiple forms of exclusion due to socioeconomic disadvantage, geographical isolation in rural areas, migrant or refugee status, or experiences of discrimination linked to gender, ethnicity, disability, or other identities. To overcome these barriers, the Toolkit proposes targeted outreach initiatives that meet young people where they are, financial support measures such as travel grants or accommodation stipends, mentoring schemes that provide guidance and role models, and the intentional creation of safe physical and digital spaces where youth feel respected and free to contribute. These strategies highlight that participation must be accessible to all young people, not only those with the resources or confidence to step forward voluntarily. By embedding inclusivity into design and practice, the Toolkit ensures that youth participation processes are more representative, equitable, and socially just.

To support the practical implementation of these strategies, the Toolkit offers a wide range of resources including guidelines, checklists, and exercises. These tools help organisers plan and facilitate activities in ways that are structured, transparent, and genuinely empowering rather than tokenistic.



For example, checklists guide organisers through accessibility considerations before, during, and after an event; guidelines for debate and dialogue provide rules that safeguard respectful communication; and practical exercises such as role plays or policy simulations help young people gain competences through experiential learning. By combining clarity of process with creativity of method, these resources ensure that young people are given real opportunities to exercise influence, make decisions, and take responsibility for outcomes.

Finally, the Toolkit strengthens its relevance and credibility by including examples of good practice from across Europe, based on the experience of the IncludeYOU partners in Greece, Spain, Hungary, and Türkiye. These case studies illustrate how inclusive youth participation can be designed and implemented in diverse cultural, political, and socioeconomic contexts. For example, Spanish initiatives demonstrate the link between youth engagement and social inclusion, Hungarian projects highlight intercultural dialogue, Turkish activities emphasise the empowerment of refugees and marginalised youth, and Greek practices showcase the role of youth councils in fostering civic competences. Together, these case studies provide inspiration and concrete reference points for other organisations and authorities seeking to design youth-friendly participation models.

By combining theoretical grounding, practical resources, and lived examples, the IncludeYOU Toolkit brings Youth Goal 9 to life. It demonstrates that safe and inclusive spaces for youth participation are not only possible but essential for strengthening democracy. In doing so, it affirms the principle that democratic processes are most legitimate and sustainable when they incorporate the diverse perspectives of young people, especially those who have historically been excluded.



The Toolkit thus represents both a policy instrument and a pedagogical resource, showing how European youth goals can move beyond abstract frameworks to become lived realities across local, national, and European levels.

Who can use the toolkit: young people, youth workers, educators, local authorities, and policymakers

The Toolkit is conceived as a multi-purpose resource intended for a wide range of stakeholders, each of whom plays a complementary role in advancing youth participation within democratic life. At its core, it is designed for young people between the ages of 17 and 30, who are not only the primary beneficiaries but also the key drivers of democratic renewal and innovation. For this group, the Toolkit functions as both a pedagogical and practical guide. It provides resources to strengthen civic competences, develop leadership and communication skills, and build critical capacities such as teamwork, negotiation, and advocacy. By engaging with these tools, young people are encouraged to cultivate the confidence necessary to initiate projects, lead campaigns, and actively contribute to collective decision-making processes.

The Toolkit equips young people with a comprehensive set of methodological instruments designed to enable meaningful interaction with policymakers on equal terms. Through structured dialogue formats, participatory exercises, and policy co-creation models, it provides young people with the skills and confidence to articulate their priorities, advocate for change, and translate their ideas into actionable proposals that can influence real-world decision-making. These tools include frameworks for youth-led consultations, participatory workshops, policy labs, and structured feedback mechanisms, all of which help young people move from expressing opinions to shaping outcomes.



By fostering this level of engagement, the Toolkit directly challenges traditional perceptions of youth as passive recipients of decisions made by others, instead positioning them as active citizens, innovators, and co-creators of democratic life. It emphasizes the importance of power-sharing, transparent processes, and structured support, ensuring that young people's contributions are not only heard but systematically integrated into governance, policy planning, and program design. Moreover, the Toolkit highlights the value of intergenerational collaboration, enabling youth to work alongside decision-makers, civil servants, and community leaders, building mutual understanding and trust. In doing so, it enhances the legitimacy, inclusivity, and responsiveness of democratic processes, demonstrating that sustainable youth engagement requires both the capacity to participate effectively and institutional mechanisms that guarantee their voices are valued and acted upon.

The intended use of the Toolkit extends far beyond the development of individual skills to encompass the broader empowerment of young people as active agents of change within their communities, national contexts, and at the European level. It underscores the fundamental principle that youth participation is not a peripheral or optional element of democratic governance, but a structural necessity for fostering representative, forward-looking, and resilient societies.

By equipping young people with the tools, methodologies, and support to engage meaningfully in policy-making and civic initiatives, the Toolkit facilitates a shift in perspective: from viewing youth as passive recipients of decisions or objects of policy intervention, to recognising them as full partners with genuine influence in shaping the democratic, social, and political landscape. In doing so, it contributes to building a culture of shared responsibility and co-creation, where young people's insights, priorities, and energy are harnessed to strengthen institutional legitimacy, responsiveness, and sustainability across local, national, and European governance structures.



Youth workers and educators constitute another key audience. They play a central role in supporting young people's participation by creating learning environments where democratic engagement is both meaningful and accessible. The Toolkit enables them to design participatory activities that empower young people, to facilitate dialogue in both formal and non-formal settings, and to integrate innovative non-formal education methods such as simulations, role plays, and peer learning into their daily practice. It strengthens their capacity to act as mentors and facilitators who guide young people through processes of critical thinking, collaboration, and civic action. In this way, the Toolkit not only builds the competences of young participants but also professionalises youth work and education by providing structured, evidence-based tools for democratic engagement.

Local authorities and policymakers are also central users of the Toolkit. For these actors, the Toolkit offers practical guidance on how to create youth-friendly policies, establish participatory structures, and institutionalise mechanisms of dialogue and co-creation. By presenting models of structured consultation, strategies for co-designing agendas, and templates for youth-policy round tables, the Toolkit helps decision-makers move beyond symbolic inclusion and embed youth participation into governance processes in a systematic and sustainable way. This contributes to strengthening democratic legitimacy, enhancing the quality of policymaking, and building mutual trust between institutions and younger generations.

Civil society organisations and networks also derive significant benefits from the Toolkit, as it equips them with concrete approaches to embed inclusive and meaningful participation practices into their projects and programmes. Whether operating at the local, national, or European level, these organisations can use the Toolkit to design initiatives that respond effectively to the diverse needs of young people, including those with fewer opportunities or from marginalized backgrounds.

By providing practical methods for structured consultation, participatory workshops, policy labs, and co-creation processes, the Toolkit enables civil society actors to create platforms where youth voices are not only heard but genuinely valued and acted upon. In doing so, it strengthens civil society's role as a bridge between grassroots youth communities and institutional decision-makers, facilitating dialogue, collaboration, and shared ownership of policies and projects. Moreover, by integrating these participatory approaches systematically, organisations enhance the sustainability, inclusivity, and legitimacy of their initiatives, contributing to the broader goal of fostering resilient, youth-centred democratic cultures across multiple levels of governance.

By addressing the needs of diverse stakeholder groups, the Toolkit serves as a vital bridge between young people, practitioners, and decision-makers. It fosters collaboration, shared responsibility, and intergenerational dialogue, all of which are essential for building stronger and more inclusive forms of democratic participation. Its multi-stakeholder orientation reflects a recognition that youth participation cannot thrive in isolation but is most effective when supported by interconnected ecosystems of actors working in partnership toward common goals. In this way, the Toolkit not only empowers young people directly but also equips the wider community of stakeholders to create lasting conditions for meaningful and sustainable engagement.



Understanding Youth Participation in Democratic Life



Defining civic and democratic participation

Civic participation can be understood as the broad spectrum of activities through which individuals contribute to shaping the wellbeing of their communities and societies. It encompasses actions that reflect a sense of responsibility for the collective environment and a commitment to strengthening social cohesion.

These activities often take place outside formal political structures and may include volunteering with local organisations, initiating community projects, supporting cultural or educational initiatives, and engaging in campaigns that address social, environmental, or human rights issues. Civic participation is therefore embedded in the fabric of everyday life. For young people in particular, it provides opportunities to exercise agency, develop competences, and influence their immediate surroundings in tangible ways. This type of participation often lays the foundation for democratic engagement, since it fosters a sense of belonging, solidarity, and shared responsibility.

Democratic participation, by contrast, refers more specifically to the ways in which citizens are directly involved in governance and decision-making processes. Traditionally, this has included activities such as voting in elections, joining political parties, attending town hall meetings, or contributing to public consultations on policies. These mechanisms remain essential for the functioning of representative democracy. However, in contemporary youth contexts, democratic participation increasingly extends beyond conventional political channels.

Young people engage in innovative forms of democratic practice, such as policy co-creation workshops, structured dialogues with decision-makers at local, national, or European levels, and digital participation through online platforms that allow them to debate, petition, and influence public policies. These new forms of engagement reflect the evolving nature of democratic life in the digital age and demonstrate that young people's political agency often takes shape in non-traditional arenas.

For young people, participation is not confined to formal politics. Their engagement frequently takes creative, informal, and non-institutional forms that reflect both the opportunities available to them and the issues they consider most pressing. Many young people volunteer with non-governmental organisations, initiate advocacy campaigns to raise awareness of climate change, gender equality, or social justice, and organise or participate in protests to draw attention to systemic challenges.

Others create digital content, such as podcasts, blogs, or social media campaigns, that influence public opinion and contribute to broader societal debates. Peer-to-peer education initiatives, intercultural exchanges, and grassroots movements represent further examples of how young people mobilise outside formal institutions to shape their societies. These practices underline that young people's democratic engagement cannot be narrowly defined by electoral participation alone but must also include their diverse and creative contributions to civic life.

Recognising this broad and multidimensional understanding of participation is essential for fostering inclusive and resilient democracies. Democratic vitality cannot be sustained solely through traditional institutions such as elections, political parties, or parliamentary representation.

While these remain central to democratic governance, they are insufficient on their own to capture the full range of civic practices through which young people engage with and shape their societies. Everyday forms of participation such as volunteering, community activism, digital advocacy, intercultural exchange, and non-formal civic initiatives constitute equally significant arenas where democratic agency is exercised. By acknowledging and valuing these practices, societies embrace a more expansive conception of democracy, one that includes both formal and informal dimensions of participation.

This recognition is particularly important in understanding young people not merely as voters or future leaders, but as active problem-solvers, innovators, and co-creators of social change in the present. Their engagement often brings creativity, fresh perspectives, and a willingness to challenge established norms, all of which contribute to making governance more adaptive and responsive to emerging societal needs. For example, youth-led initiatives addressing climate change, digital literacy, or social justice demonstrate how young people mobilise collective action, raise awareness, and influence policy debates both inside and outside formal institutions. These practices illustrate that democratic participation is not limited to traditional political mechanisms but includes the diverse and evolving ways in which young people express agency and contribute to the public good.

Within the European context, recognising and valuing civic and democratic participation in all its forms is essential for strengthening the legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness of democratic institutions. By acknowledging non-traditional forms of engagement such as grassroots activism, digital participation, volunteering, and issue-based advocacy policymakers signal to young people that their contributions are meaningful, regardless of whether they occur through formal mechanisms like voting or structured political processes. This recognition fosters trust between young citizens and institutions, helping to counteract concerns about democratic disengagement, political alienation, and declining youth participation in traditional governance channels. Moreover, it aligns closely with the core principles of the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, which is structured around three key pillars: engaging young people in democratic life, connecting them across borders and communities, and empowering them as partners in shaping the future of Europe. By promoting a broader understanding of participation, the Toolkit supports these strategic objectives, demonstrating that youth engagement is diverse, valuable, and integral to building a vibrant, resilient, and inclusive European democratic culture.





By advancing a multidimensional understanding of participation, European societies can foster not only greater inclusivity but also more equitable and responsive democratic systems that reflect the realities, needs, and aspirations of younger generations. Recognising youth voices across formal, informal, and digital channels ensures that their perspectives are not marginalised, but integrated as essential components of democratic life.

This comprehensive approach strengthens both the legitimacy and resilience of democratic governance, enabling institutions to respond more effectively to social change, innovation, and intergenerational priorities. In this way, participation in its broadest sense becomes a cornerstone of democratic renewal, providing young people with meaningful influence while supporting the long-term objectives of the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Goals. By embedding youth engagement as a structural principle rather than an ad hoc practice, Europe lays the groundwork for sustainable, participatory, and forward-looking democracies in which young citizens are recognised as full partners in shaping the present and future of society.

The role of young people as active citizens and policy contributors

The role of young people as active citizens and policy contributors is central to the development of inclusive, responsive, and forward-looking democratic societies. Contemporary democratic theory emphasises that legitimacy and sustainability in governance depend not only on representation through formal elections but also on the meaningful involvement of citizens in shaping policies and social structures (Smith, 2009). Within this framework, young people are not passive recipients of policies designed on their behalf but active agents of change who bring fresh perspectives, creativity, and energy into public life.



Their participation is essential for ensuring that policies and programmes reflect the realities, aspirations, and needs of younger generations, whose futures are directly affected by today's decisions. When young people are provided with the space, resources, and tools to engage meaningfully, they are able to identify emerging challenges early, propose innovative solutions, and mobilise their communities toward collective action.

Active citizenship among young people manifests in both formal and informal structures. Formalised mechanisms such as youth councils, student parliaments, and local youth boards offer opportunities for young people to learn about democratic processes while directly contributing to decision-making. These platforms provide experiential education in civic engagement, enabling participants to develop leadership skills, practice deliberation and negotiation, and advocate for initiatives that address their communities' needs. Such structures not only foster the political socialisation of young people but also build trust between institutions and younger generations by creating visible channels for influence. In turn, this helps bridge generational divides, counters political disengagement, and enhances the legitimacy of democratic systems (Council of Europe, 2020).

Beyond formal structures, young people contribute to democratic life through volunteering schemes, advocacy campaigns, grassroots movements, and transnational networks. Many youth-led initiatives address pressing global issues such as climate change, social inequality, digital literacy, and human rights. These actions range from local community service projects to large-scale movements like the Fridays for Future climate campaign, which demonstrate the capacity of youth to influence both public opinion and institutional policy agendas.



Advocacy strategies often include the use of petitions, digital campaigns, and social media activism, which expand participation opportunities beyond geographical and institutional boundaries. Intercultural exchanges and peer-to-peer education programmes further highlight the ways in which youth create transnational solidarity and policy influence, particularly within the European context. Such initiatives illustrate how young people act not only as beneficiaries of policy but as co-creators and reformers of the civic and political systems in which they live.

Recognising young people as active citizens and policy contributors requires a fundamental shift in both societal attitudes and institutional practices. This recognition goes beyond rhetorical commitments to youth inclusion and entails creating structural conditions in which young people are treated as equal partners in democratic life. It involves acknowledging not only their right to participate but also their capacity to shape collective futures through creative problem-solving, innovative perspectives, and lived experiences that differ from those of older generations. Empowering young people in this way strengthens their sense of belonging, responsibility, and ownership of democratic processes, transforming participation from a symbolic exercise into a substantive practice of co-creation.

From a governance perspective, integrating youth as active contributors enriches decision-making processes by incorporating a diversity of voices that are often marginalised in traditional political systems. The perspectives of young people whether informed by their experiences of digitalisation, climate anxiety, economic precarity, or cultural hybridity bring insights that are indispensable for shaping policies that are inclusive, forward-looking, and responsive to emerging challenges. This inclusivity directly contributes to the legitimacy of governance systems, as policies developed through youth participation are more likely to reflect the realities and needs of the broader population.

From an academic standpoint, such an approach resonates with participatory and deliberative democratic theories, which emphasise inclusivity, dialogue, and co-creation as essential conditions for legitimate governance. Participatory democracy highlights the value of direct citizen involvement in shaping decisions that affect their lives, while deliberative democracy stresses the importance of reasoned dialogue and mutual understanding in the pursuit of collective goals. By situating young people within these frameworks, societies not only validate their role as contributors but also expand the scope and depth of democratic practice itself.

Ultimately, the active involvement of young people strengthens the resilience, adaptability, and legitimacy of democratic systems by ensuring that policies are innovative, responsive, and aligned with both current and long-term societal needs. Young people contribute not only through formal institutions such as youth councils, advisory boards, and structured dialogue platforms, but also through grassroots activism, volunteering, digital engagement, and advocacy campaigns. These contributions demonstrate that youth are not merely future leaders awaiting their turn to participate; they are active shapers of democratic life in the present, influencing decisions, practices, and social norms. By embedding youth participation as a core element of governance, democratic systems become more inclusive, dynamic, and sustainable. In this sense, youth engagement is not an optional or peripheral aspect of democracy it is fundamental to its vitality, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability, both within Europe and in democratic societies globally.



Barriers to youth participation (social, economic, digital, cultural)

Despite notable progress in promoting youth engagement, young people continue to encounter multiple barriers that restrict their full and equal participation in civic and democratic life. These barriers take many forms social, economic, digital, and cultural and they rarely exist in isolation. Social obstacles, such as age-based discrimination or lack of recognition of young voices, often discourage meaningful involvement in decision-making processes. Economic challenges, including unemployment, financial insecurity, and unequal access to resources, further limit opportunities for active participation.

Digital divides, marked by unequal access to technology, digital literacy, and online safety, create additional gaps in engagement, especially in an increasingly digitalized public sphere. Cultural barriers, such as stereotypes, traditional hierarchies, or exclusionary norms, can silence youth perspectives and reinforce marginalization. When these barriers intersect, they amplify disadvantages for certain groups of young people particularly those from marginalized communities, rural areas, or minority backgrounds ultimately constraining their ability to contribute fully to civic life and democratic governance. Social barriers include discrimination, exclusion, and the persistent lack of representation of young people in decision-making processes. Many young people, particularly those from minority groups, rural areas, or marginalised communities, find that their voices are either underrepresented or ignored. This lack of inclusion undermines their confidence to participate and reduces the legitimacy of democratic processes that claim to reflect the needs of all citizens.

Economic barriers remain one of the most significant obstacles to meaningful youth engagement. High rates of youth unemployment, underemployment, and the prevalence of precarious or informal work leave many young people struggling with financial insecurity, which directly limits their capacity to participate in civic life. Poverty and economic exclusion not only reduce the time and resources youth can dedicate to volunteering, advocacy, or community initiatives, but also affect their confidence and sense of belonging in democratic spaces. Even when participation opportunities exist, the hidden and indirect costs such as transportation, accommodation, participation fees, or the expectation of unpaid volunteering create financial burdens that are simply unattainable for those with fewer resources.



Consequently, youth engagement initiatives often end up disproportionately accessible to individuals from more privileged or economically stable backgrounds, reinforcing existing cycles of inequality and leaving the voices of marginalized youth underrepresented in civic and democratic processes.

Digital barriers have become increasingly significant in today's highly digitalised society. While online tools, platforms, and social media have the potential to expand youth participation and enable new forms of civic engagement, unequal access to technology remains a major obstacle. Not all young people have reliable access to devices, high-speed internet, or the digital literacy required to navigate online consultations, virtual workshops, or e-learning opportunities effectively.

This digital divide disproportionately affects youth in rural, remote, or economically disadvantaged areas, as well as those from marginalized or underrepresented groups, effectively excluding them from important online debates, decision-making processes, and knowledge-sharing networks. If these gaps are not addressed, digitalisation risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than bridging them, limiting the ability of young people to participate meaningfully in civic life and undermining the inclusivity and effectiveness of democratic processes.

Cultural barriers also play a critical role in limiting youth participation. These often manifest through a lack of recognition of young people’s voices within political, institutional, and community spaces, where decision-making power is still largely dominated by older generations. Persistent stereotypes portraying youth as inexperienced, apathetic, or ill-prepared to engage in serious civic dialogue undermine the legitimacy of their perspectives and contributions. In many contexts, entrenched generational power imbalances reinforce these attitudes, resulting in youth being consulted only superficially or their input being dismissed as symbolic rather than substantive. This tokenistic approach not only restricts young people’s ability to influence outcomes but also fosters frustration and disillusionment, making them feel excluded from processes that directly affect their lives. Over time, such dynamics discourage continued involvement and perpetuate a cycle of disengagement, further marginalizing youth in civic and democratic life.

Addressing these barriers requires deliberate, sustained, and inclusive strategies that place young people at the center of civic and democratic processes. Participation opportunities must be designed with accessibility and equity in mind, ensuring that all youth regardless of their social background, economic situation, digital access, or cultural context are able to contribute meaningfully. This involves not only removing practical obstacles, such as financial and technological barriers, but also challenging discriminatory attitudes, dismantling generational power imbalances, and creating spaces where youth perspectives are genuinely valued and acted upon. By embedding inclusivity into the design of civic engagement frameworks, societies can foster a democratic culture where every young person has both the opportunity and the agency to engage, influence, and help shape the future of their communities. Ultimately, the meaningful involvement of young people is not just a matter of fairness, but a prerequisite for resilient, innovative, and representative democracies.



The importance of inclusion and equal access

The importance of inclusion and equal access in youth participation lies at the very heart of democratic legitimacy. A democracy that does not guarantee genuine opportunities for all young people to contribute to decision-making processes risks creating institutions and policies that reflect only the interests of the privileged few. As Lister (2007) highlights, the exclusion of marginalised groups results not only in silenced voices but also in the reproduction of structural inequalities that weaken the social contract between citizens and institutions. For young people in particular, whose voices have historically been underrepresented in formal politics, the question of inclusion is both urgent and foundational. Their perspectives are essential in ensuring that policies respond to the realities of contemporary societies, which are increasingly diverse, globalised, and shaped by rapid social and technological change.

Inclusion requires that opportunities for participation be intentionally designed to engage a wide spectrum of young people, especially those who are most often excluded from mainstream activities. These include young people not in education, employment, or training, who may feel disconnected from formal institutions and lack access to support structures; young people from minority ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, who often face discrimination or limited recognition of their identities; and migrants and refugees, who encounter legal and social barriers to integration. Rural youth face geographic isolation, fewer cultural and political opportunities, and a lack of youth organisations in their communities. Young people with disabilities may confront both physical obstacles, such as inaccessible venues and resources, and social barriers such as stigma or paternalistic attitudes that limit their agency. Without targeted efforts to engage these groups, participation structures risk reinforcing inequality by privileging those who already have access, knowledge, and resources.



Equal access goes beyond inviting young people to events or offering them a seat at the table. It requires the creation of structures and processes that ensure that participation is meaningful and that young people's contributions have real impact. This means addressing financial barriers through mechanisms such as travel grants, accommodation subsidies, and free access to events, so that economic hardship does not prevent engagement. Cultural and linguistic barriers can be addressed through the provision of translation and interpretation services, the use of inclusive facilitation practices, and the recognition of diverse cultural perspectives in the design of activities.

Digital barriers, which have become increasingly evident with the rise of online and hybrid participation, require investment in accessible technologies, capacity-building in digital literacy, and strategies to ensure that youth without reliable internet access or digital devices are not excluded. Physical accessibility also remains a critical concern, requiring venues that are barrier-free and resources that are adapted to different needs, such as easy-to-read formats, subtitled audiovisual materials, and sign language interpretation.

Beyond structural adjustments, genuine inclusion also requires the cultivation of a participatory culture in which all young people feel welcome, respected, and safe. Social and emotional safety is fundamental: youth must have confidence that their voices will be heard without prejudice, and that their contributions will not be dismissed, ridiculed, or appropriated. Creating such an environment demands intentional efforts from facilitators and organizers, including the implementation of anti-discrimination measures, the establishment of clear ground rules for respectful dialogue, and the careful management of power dynamics within groups. For young people from marginalized or underrepresented communities, additional mentoring, peer support, and capacity-building opportunities may be necessary to help them feel confident and empowered to speak out. These mechanisms should not be seen as optional or secondary, but as essential elements of inclusive participation design, ensuring that every young person can engage meaningfully and on equal terms.

Inclusion and equal access strengthen democracy by making it more representative, responsive, and resilient. A democratic system that privileges only certain voices cannot fully reflect or address the complexity of its society, and risks alienating groups that feel excluded from the political process.



On the other hand, when participation includes marginalised young people, policies and initiatives are enriched by diverse perspectives and lived experiences. These contributions often bring innovative solutions, highlight overlooked challenges, and ensure that responses are more equitable and sustainable. As the Council of Europe (2015) has noted, inclusive participation not only broadens representation but also increases the legitimacy and effectiveness of decision-making processes by embedding them in the realities of citizens' daily lives.

The empowering effects of inclusion extend well beyond the immediate impact on policies and decisions. When young people experience meaningful participation, they gain confidence in their ability to influence change and develop civic competences such as critical thinking, negotiation, collaboration, and public communication.

These skills not only prepare them for active citizenship in the present but also increase the likelihood that they will continue to engage in civic life over the long term. This creates a virtuous cycle, whereby participation fosters empowerment, empowerment fosters engagement, and engagement strengthens democratic culture. Inclusive participation therefore represents both a moral imperative, rooted in principles of fairness and justice, and a strategic investment in the sustainability of democracy itself. By embedding equality, justice, and solidarity as core values, inclusive youth participation helps to ensure that democratic systems are not only representative but also resilient in the face of social and political challenges.



European Youth Goals as a framework for action

The eleven European Youth Goals provide a shared and participatory roadmap for building youth-friendly societies across the continent, ensuring that the voices, aspirations, and needs of young people are fully integrated into European policy priorities. These Goals are the outcome of the EU Youth Dialogue, a structured consultation process in which thousands of young people across Europe contributed their experiences and visions for the future (European Commission, 2019).

As such, they represent not only institutional objectives but also the collective articulation of young people's priorities at a transnational level. Together, the Youth Goals cover a wide spectrum of domains that affect the everyday lives of young people. They address the creation of inclusive societies that tackle discrimination and promote equality, the improvement of education and training systems to meet contemporary challenges, the provision of adequate support for mental health and wellbeing, the advancement of environmental sustainability, and the guarantee of meaningful opportunities for democratic participation. Each goal thus serves as both a policy guide for institutions and a framework for youth organisations to mobilise action and monitor progress.

This Toolkit aligns most directly with European Youth Goal 9, Space and Participation for All. Goal 9 underscores the need to establish safe, inclusive, and accessible spaces where young people can actively engage in civic and democratic life on equal terms. It recognises that democratic vitality depends on the existence of institutional and social spaces that are genuinely open to youth voices, rather than symbolic invitations to participate. The Toolkit translates this vision into practice by offering models of dialogue, practical resources, and inclusive strategies that can be adapted across local, national, and European levels.



Through tools such as youth–policy round tables, policy labs, and structured dialogue methods, the Toolkit provides stakeholders with replicable processes for embedding Goal 9 into youth participation initiatives. In this way, it operationalises one of the central priorities of European youth policy and ensures that Goal 9 is not merely aspirational but actionable.

While its primary contribution lies in advancing Goal 9, the Toolkit also supports several other European Youth Goals. Goal 1, Connecting EU with Youth, emphasises the importance of strengthening the relationship between young people and the European project by ensuring that youth are meaningfully engaged in shaping European values, policies, and processes. Through its focus on Erasmus+, cross-border cooperation, and structured dialogue, the Toolkit enhances this connection by helping young people situate their local experiences within broader European frameworks. Goal 4, Information and Constructive Dialogue, highlights the necessity of providing young people with access to reliable, youth-friendly information and of creating spaces for dialogue with decision-makers. The Toolkit contributes directly to this goal by offering resources that foster transparency in communication, guidance for effective facilitation, and participatory methods that ensure dialogue processes move beyond tokenism to genuine influence.

The Toolkit also reflects the priorities of Goal 10, Sustainable Green Europe, recognizing that environmental sustainability has become one of the most dynamic areas of youth mobilisation. Movements such as Fridays for Future have demonstrated the capacity of young people not only to participate in, but also to lead, global debates on climate change, ecological justice, and the urgent need for sustainable transitions. By supporting youth-led initiatives, advocacy campaigns, and community projects that integrate sustainability into civic engagement, the Toolkit empowers young people to connect democratic participation with environmental responsibility. In doing so, it situates youth engagement within the broader framework of intergenerational justice, highlighting young people’s unique role in shaping long-term resilience and ensuring that the choices made today safeguard the rights and well-being of future generations.



By aligning with these European Youth Goals, the Toolkit demonstrates how local and national practices can contribute to shared European objectives and how policy frameworks at the European level can be translated into tangible practices for young people and those who work with them. It highlights the mutually reinforcing relationship between grassroots youth participation and European strategies, illustrating how bottom-up and top-down processes can work together to create systemic change. The Toolkit reinforces the idea that the European Youth Goals are not abstract policy aspirations but practical frameworks that can guide daily work in youth participation. Ultimately, this alignment contributes to building a Europe in which young people are empowered not only to learn and develop competences but also to actively contribute to shaping inclusive, democratic, and sustainable societies.

Building Civic Competences and Initiative

Key competences for active citizenship: critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, communication

To participate effectively in democratic life, young people must acquire and strengthen a set of key competences that enable them to engage critically, collaborate constructively, and contribute meaningfully to civic processes. These competences provide the foundation for active citizenship and ensure that participation transcends symbolic presence, becoming genuinely impactful. Among the most essential competences are critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, and communication.

While each competence serves a distinct function, they are deeply interconnected and collectively reinforce young people's capacity to act as engaged and responsible citizens.

Critical thinking equips young people with the intellectual tools necessary to navigate complex and often contradictory information environments. In an era characterised by rapid information flows across traditional and digital media, young people are frequently exposed to misinformation, manipulation, and polarised debates (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Developing critical thinking skills allows them to question sources, analyse policies, recognise bias, and consider multiple perspectives. Beyond information literacy, critical thinking supports civic reasoning by enabling young people to evaluate the implications of policy decisions, understand the interests of diverse stakeholders, and formulate evidence-based contributions to discussions. In participatory settings, critical thinking fosters respectful engagement with opposing views while strengthening the ability to defend one's values and positions with clarity and confidence.

Leadership is another fundamental competence that empowers young people to assume responsibility, inspire peers, and guide collective initiatives. Leadership in the context of youth participation should not be understood solely in terms of holding formal authority. Rather, it encompasses the ability to mobilise others, coordinate actions, and facilitate collaboration. Effective youth leadership is inclusive and relational, drawing on the strengths of diverse individuals and creating environments where everyone can contribute (Komives et al., 2006). By cultivating leadership skills, young people gain confidence to design, implement, and sustain projects, advocate for causes, and influence policy debates. Importantly, leadership also includes the capacity to recognise when to step back and empower others, reflecting democratic values of equality and shared responsibility.





Teamwork is indispensable for democratic participation because civic life inherently depends on collaboration across differences. Working effectively in teams requires empathy, adaptability, and an appreciation of diversity. Through teamwork, young people learn to negotiate, build consensus, resolve conflicts, and achieve common goals despite divergent perspectives. These experiences highlight the cooperative nature of democracy, where progress emerges not from individual victories but from inclusive processes that integrate multiple voices (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Teamwork also reinforces solidarity and collective agency, teaching young people that their contributions, when combined with those of others, can achieve greater and more sustainable impact.

Communication underpins all dimensions of active citizenship. The ability to articulate ideas clearly, listen actively, and engage in constructive dialogue enables young people to both share their perspectives and understand the views of others. Communication competences are essential in debates, negotiations, advocacy campaigns, and policy consultations. They allow youth to frame arguments persuasively, adapt messages to different audiences, and employ respectful and accessible language. Importantly, effective communication is not limited to speaking but also involves active listening and recognition of others' voices, thereby fostering the two-way exchange that is fundamental to democratic participation (Habermas, 1996). In increasingly digital societies, communication also encompasses the ability to engage responsibly online, ensuring that digital participation complements rather than undermines civic discourse.

Competences constitute the backbone of active citizenship. Critical thinking sharpens analysis, leadership inspires and organises action, teamwork enables collaboration, and communication ensures mutual understanding.

When young people cultivate these competences, they are better prepared to take part in democratic processes, influence decision-making, and contribute to building inclusive and resilient societies. These skills not only benefit youth individually by enhancing their personal development and employability, but also strengthen communities by fostering informed, cooperative, and dynamic participation. Viewed collectively, they represent both an educational objective and a democratic necessity, ensuring that participation in civic life is meaningful, effective, and sustainable.

Methods to strengthen initiative (youth-led projects, debates, advocacy campaigns)

Strengthening initiative is a critical component of empowering young people to take an active and meaningful role in shaping their communities and influencing democratic life. Initiative goes beyond participation in existing structures; it involves identifying opportunities, taking responsibility, proposing solutions, and leading change. To cultivate this capacity, young people need access to practical methods and structured environments where they can test ideas, practice leadership skills, and gain confidence in their ability to make a tangible impact. Three particularly effective approaches for fostering initiative are youth-led projects, structured debates, and advocacy campaigns. Youth-led projects allow young people to design and implement solutions to real-world challenges, building project management and collaborative skills. Structured debates provide a platform for critical thinking, public speaking, and negotiation, helping young people articulate their positions and engage constructively with differing perspectives. Advocacy campaigns enable youth to identify issues that matter to them, develop strategic communication plans, and influence decision-makers at local, national, or even European levels. Together, these approaches not only strengthen individual capacities but also cultivate a culture of active citizenship, encouraging young people to move from passive participation to proactive leadership in democratic life.

Youth-led projects are one of the most effective ways to support initiative because they place young people at the centre of the design and implementation process. By identifying issues that matter to them, planning activities, managing resources, and evaluating results, young people learn to take ownership of their actions and see the direct outcomes of their efforts.

This hands-on experience teaches them project management, problem-solving, and leadership skills, while also demonstrating that their contributions can create real change. Youth-led projects can range from local community clean-ups and peer education workshops to cross-border cultural exchanges or social entrepreneurship initiatives. What unites them is the opportunity they give young people to transform ideas into tangible results, reinforcing their belief in their ability to influence society.

Debates represent a particularly effective method for strengthening initiative by giving young people structured opportunities to develop dialogue, argumentation, and critical thinking skills. In debate settings, participants are required to research issues thoroughly, construct logical and evidence-based arguments, anticipate counterpoints, and present their ideas clearly and persuasively. This process encourages youth to take initiative in expressing their views while simultaneously fostering respect for differing perspectives and collaborative problem-solving. Debates simulate the dynamics of democratic life, where diverse interests and opinions must be negotiated and balanced, preparing young people to engage constructively in public discussions, civic forums, and policymaking processes. They can be implemented in a variety of contexts, from schools and youth councils to community forums and digital platforms, and can address local, national, or European-level issues. This versatility makes debates a powerful tool not only for developing individual skills and confidence but also for cultivating a culture of active, informed, and responsible citizenship.

Advocacy campaigns combine creativity and collective action to influence decision-makers and raise awareness about important issues. By using methods such as street theatre, art exhibitions, digital storytelling, social media campaigns, or public demonstrations, young people can reach wide audiences and draw attention to causes they care about.





Advocacy campaigns strengthen initiative by teaching young people how to mobilise support, craft compelling messages, and engage with policymakers and the public. They also help develop resilience, as advocacy often requires persistence and determination in the face of resistance or indifference. Through these campaigns, young people learn that their voices, when expressed collectively and creatively, can challenge the status quo and inspire meaningful change.

Together, youth-led projects, debates, and advocacy campaigns provide practical and empowering pathways for young people to strengthen their initiative. Each method equips them with different skills and experiences, while all reinforce the central message that young people are not passive observers but active agents of change capable of shaping democratic life.

Non-formal education as a tool for competence development

Non-formal education is widely recognised as a powerful tool for competence development, particularly in preparing young people for active participation in civic and democratic life. Unlike formal education, which is typically structured, curriculum-driven, and oriented towards examinations and certification, non-formal education emphasises flexibility, creativity, and experiential learning. It provides opportunities for young people to engage in processes that are participatory, learner-centred, and reflective, making it especially effective in cultivating the competences required for active citizenship.

The strength of non-formal education lies in its experiential dimension, which encourages young people to learn by doing and to apply new knowledge and skills in real-life contexts. Activities such as workshops, simulations, intercultural exchanges, debates, and peer-to-peer projects allow participants to experiment with roles, test ideas, and reflect on outcomes in safe environments. These methods not only make learning more engaging but also increase retention and transferability, enabling young people to apply their competences to future civic or professional situations.



Critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, and communication are foundational skills that can be developed through carefully designed youth participation activities. Critical thinking is nurtured through exercises that challenge young people to analyse complex social, political, or environmental issues, identify biases, evaluate competing perspectives, and propose evidence-based solutions. Leadership is cultivated by placing youth in roles where they must coordinate activities, delegate responsibilities, motivate peers, and take ownership of collective outcomes. Teamwork is strengthened through collaborative projects that require negotiation, compromise, and the recognition of the diverse strengths, skills, and viewpoints of group members. Communication skills are enhanced in activities that encourage dialogue, storytelling, debate, and public speaking, enabling young people to express their ideas clearly, engage others persuasively, and listen attentively with respect for different perspectives. By combining these approaches, young people not only develop individual competencies but also learn to work effectively in teams, engage constructively in civic spaces, and assume active roles as informed, responsible, and empowered participants in democratic life.

Another defining feature of non-formal education is its inclusivity. Because it does not rely on rigid academic prerequisites or competitive assessment, it can engage young people from diverse backgrounds, including those who may feel excluded from or disempowered by formal education systems. Non-formal education values personal experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, thereby validating the contributions of all participants and promoting equity in learning. This inclusive approach is particularly significant for youth participation in democratic life, as it ensures that competences are developed broadly across different social groups rather than being concentrated among the already privileged.



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Ultimately, non-formal education not only equips young people with the skills needed for civic engagement but also instils in them a sense of agency, responsibility, and confidence. By fostering reflective, participatory, and empowering learning processes, it complements formal education and fills critical gaps in preparing youth for active citizenship. In doing so, non-formal education plays a central role in strengthening democratic societies by cultivating informed, engaged, and competent young citizens.

Non-formal education methods include a wide variety of practices such as workshops, simulations, role plays, peer learning, and outdoor activities. Each of these methods helps young people develop competences by encouraging them to engage actively, rather than passively, in the learning process. Workshops allow participants to exchange ideas, work collaboratively on tasks, and explore real-life challenges in a supportive environment. Simulations and role plays immerse young people in decision-making scenarios, enabling them to experience the complexities of civic and political processes and to practise negotiation, problem-solving, and advocacy. Peer learning encourages participants to share their knowledge and experiences with one another, highlighting the value of collaboration and mutual support.

A defining feature of non-formal education is its focus on “learning by doing” and the use of reflection as a key part of the learning cycle. Activities are designed not only to build practical skills but also to prompt participants to reflect on what they learned, how they acted, and how these experiences can be applied in their lives and communities. This reflective dimension is crucial in competence development, as it enables young people to connect abstract concepts such as democracy, inclusion, and participation to their personal realities and future actions.

Non-formal education also offers an inclusive and adaptable approach to learning. Because it does not rely on formal qualifications or rigid structures, it can be tailored to the needs of different groups of young people, including those who may struggle in traditional education systems. It values diversity, encourages creativity, and creates safe spaces where participants feel comfortable experimenting, expressing themselves, and learning from mistakes. This inclusiveness ensures that all young people, regardless of their background, can benefit from opportunities to strengthen their civic competences.

By combining interactive methods with experiential and reflective learning, non-formal education equips young people with the skills and attitudes they need to participate meaningfully in society. It complements formal education by addressing areas that schools and universities often overlook, particularly the development of practical competences for democratic engagement. In this way, non-formal education is not just an alternative but an essential tool for preparing young people to become active, responsible, and empowered citizens.



Practical exercises: simulations, role plays, and policy labs

Practical exercises are among the most effective pedagogical strategies for helping young people to experience democratic participation firsthand and to develop the competences required for active citizenship. Rooted in the principles of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), these interactive approaches enable participants not only to acquire theoretical knowledge of democratic processes but also to practise them in settings that approximate real-life conditions.

By actively engaging in simulations, role plays, and policy labs, young people are encouraged to transform abstract concepts into lived experiences, reflect critically on their actions, and experiment with different roles and responsibilities within a safe and supportive environment. These activities embody the ethos of non-formal education, where learning is participatory, reflective, and directly transferable to civic and political life.

Simulations are particularly powerful tools for civic education because they recreate the dynamics of actual decision-making processes. Examples include mock sessions of the European Parliament, model municipal council debates, or simulations of United Nations assemblies. In such exercises, participants are assigned roles as elected officials, government representatives, or members of civil society, and are tasked with negotiating, debating, and reaching collective decisions on specific issues.

By engaging in these processes, young people gain insight into how institutions operate, how compromises are achieved, and how policy agendas are negotiated and adopted. Beyond institutional knowledge, simulations foster competences such as public speaking, negotiation, and analytical reasoning, while also helping participants to grasp the complexity of representation and governance. As research in civic education demonstrates, simulations enhance both cognitive understanding and civic motivation, making them especially effective in preparing young people for democratic life (McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Role plays complement simulations by encouraging participants to adopt the perspectives of diverse stakeholders in civic or political issues. For instance, in a role play on climate policy, young people might assume the identities of government officials, corporate actors, environmental activists, or local citizens.



This method requires them to empathise with competing interests, articulate positions that may differ from their own, and negotiate towards constructive solutions. In doing so, participants learn flexibility, adaptability, and conflict resolution skills. Role plays underline the importance of dialogue, empathy, and compromise in democratic engagement, illustrating that effective participation depends not only on advancing one's own views but also on understanding and reconciling those of others. Scholars of participatory education have highlighted that role plays help to challenge stereotypes, foster intercultural understanding, and cultivate dispositions of tolerance and cooperation (Camicia, 2007).

Policy labs move beyond simulated or role-based exercises by creating structured platforms where young people and policymakers work collaboratively to co-design policy recommendations. Typically, these labs bring together mixed groups of youth, decision-makers, and experts who analyse challenges, generate innovative solutions, and formulate concrete policy proposals.

Unlike traditional consultations, policy labs adopt a co-creation approach that treats young participants as equal partners in the decision-making process. This not only strengthens young people's initiative and confidence but also allows policymakers to benefit from new insights and creative perspectives that may otherwise be overlooked. The participatory and solution-oriented character of policy labs contributes to building trust between youth and institutions, demonstrating that dialogue can lead to tangible outcomes.

By institutionalising these practices, policy labs provide a replicable model for bridging the gap between policy formulation and youth engagement (Sirianni, 2009).

Taken together, simulations, role plays, and policy labs exemplify the value of experiential learning in youth participation. They combine practical engagement with critical reflection, equipping young people with competences such as communication, teamwork, negotiation, and problem-solving. Perhaps most importantly, these methods convey to young people that their voices matter, that democratic processes are accessible to them, and that they can exercise agency in shaping the policies and decisions that affect their lives. By embedding such exercises within youth work and civic education, societies not only prepare young people for democratic participation but also invest in the long-term resilience and inclusivity of democratic systems.



Inclusive Approaches to Youth Engagement

Strategies for involving young people with fewer opportunities

Involving young people with fewer opportunities constitutes a fundamental requirement for ensuring that democratic participation is genuinely inclusive, representative, and sustainable. Empirical research on youth participation consistently demonstrates that individuals who experience social, economic, or cultural disadvantage remain systematically underrepresented in civic and political processes, despite being disproportionately affected by the outcomes of policy decisions (Checkoway, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). This underrepresentation weakens the legitimacy of democratic institutions by creating governance structures that primarily reflect the perspectives of privileged groups while neglecting the needs of marginalised populations. Moreover, the exclusion of disadvantaged youth perpetuates cycles of marginalisation and disempowerment, reinforcing the barriers that prevent these groups from exercising their rights as full citizens.



The absence of young people with fewer opportunities from decision-making spaces also has significant consequences for the quality of democratic governance. Diversity of perspective is critical for generating responsive, innovative, and equitable policies. When participation is restricted, the lived experiences of disadvantaged youth such as navigating poverty, migration, rural isolation, or disability remain invisible in policymaking processes.

This results in policies that are less likely to address the structural inequalities that shape young people's lives and that often exacerbate existing disparities (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2017). In this way, the exclusion of disadvantaged youth is not simply a matter of fairness but a substantive limitation on the capacity of democratic institutions to produce effective and just outcomes.

Ensuring the inclusion of these young people requires intentional and targeted strategies within youth work and policy frameworks. Outreach initiatives that engage directly with marginalised communities, financial support mechanisms that reduce economic barriers to participation, and the creation of accessible and safe spaces for dialogue are all essential measures.

Equally important is the cultivation of mentoring and peer-support structures that provide disadvantaged youth with the confidence, knowledge, and competences to engage meaningfully in civic life (Council of Europe, 2015). Such strategies not only remove barriers but also affirm the value of young people's voices, sending a clear message that their perspectives are indispensable to democratic decision-making.

From a broader perspective, the involvement of young people with fewer opportunities is integral to the sustainability of democratic systems. Democracies that exclude significant portions of their youth population risk losing legitimacy, fostering disengagement, and undermining social cohesion.

Conversely, democracies that make participation accessible to all young people, regardless of their background or circumstances, strengthen resilience by embedding inclusivity and equity into their political culture. In this way, involving young people with fewer opportunities is not simply an ethical imperative but a strategic necessity for the vitality and sustainability of democracy itself.



For these reasons, youth work and civic education must adopt intentional, equity-oriented strategies that explicitly target the reduction of barriers and actively facilitate the participation of young people with fewer opportunities. Such strategies may include outreach initiatives that bring participatory opportunities directly to marginalised communities, financial support mechanisms that address economic constraints, and mentoring or peer-to-peer schemes that provide ongoing guidance and confidence-building. Moreover, inclusive participation requires the adaptation of methodologies to different needs, such as offering activities in multiple languages, providing accessible digital platforms, and ensuring that physical spaces are free of barriers for those with disabilities. Embedding these practices into youth work and civic education frameworks moves participation beyond symbolic gestures and towards transformative engagement. It ensures that all young people, regardless of background, are recognised as rights-holders and potential contributors to the democratic process. In doing so, societies not only uphold the principles of fairness and equality but also enrich democratic life with the lived experiences, perspectives, and innovative capacities of groups too often excluded from decision-making.

Active outreach is a critical first step in closing this participation gap. Young people in rural areas frequently lack access to youth organisations, cultural opportunities, and policymaking spaces, which reduces their engagement compared to peers in urban settings (Walther et al., 2020). Migrant and refugee youth often face linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and legal uncertainties that make civic involvement difficult (Collet, 2017). Disadvantaged young people more broadly may feel excluded because of stigma, lack of representation, or the absence of relatable role models in decision-making. Outreach strategies must therefore be proactive, meeting young people in schools, community centres, neighbourhoods, or online spaces where they already gather. Importantly, outreach is not only about informing young people of opportunities but also about building trust, recognising their lived experiences, and designing initiatives that are relevant to their needs.



Financial support is another indispensable strategy for enabling participation. Participation in civic life often involves costs such as transportation, accommodation, meals, or learning materials. For young people from low-income backgrounds, these costs can make participation impossible (Loncle et al., 2012). Providing financial assistance through travel grants, accommodation stipends, or free access to activities removes these economic barriers and signals a commitment to fairness and equality. It also conveys the message that participation is a right for all young people rather than a privilege for those with financial means. In the context of European youth policy, financial support mechanisms reflect the principles of Erasmus+ and the EU Youth Strategy, which emphasise equal access and fairness.

Mentoring and peer-to-peer support also play a vital role in creating inclusive participation processes. Mentoring connects young people with role models who can provide guidance, encouragement, and reassurance as they navigate unfamiliar environments (Darling et al., 2006). Peer-to-peer support strengthens solidarity, as young people learn from one another, share experiences, and motivate each other to remain engaged. These approaches foster a sense of belonging and community that is particularly important for youth who may feel isolated or excluded. Evidence from youth work demonstrates that mentoring and peer support can reduce barriers to participation by addressing not only structural disadvantages but also psychological and social obstacles (Devlin, 2010).

By combining outreach, financial support, and mentoring, organisations can move beyond symbolic inclusion to create genuine opportunities for disadvantaged youth. These strategies ensure that young people with fewer opportunities are not only invited to participate but are also empowered to engage meaningfully and confidently.



Their involvement enriches democratic life by bringing forward diverse perspectives and lived experiences, leading to policies that are more representative, effective, and just. From an academic perspective, these strategies are more than practical interventions; they embody principles of social justice, affirming that democracy is strongest when all young people, regardless of background, have the chance to shape the decisions that affect their futures.

Creating safe and accessible participation spaces

Creating safe and accessible spaces for youth participation is fundamental to ensuring that all young people can engage meaningfully in democratic life. Safety in this context must be conceptualised as multidimensional, encompassing physical, social, and emotional dimensions that collectively determine the quality of participation. Physical safety relates not only to the provision of venues that are secure and barrier-free but also to the guarantee that logistical arrangements such as transport, accommodation, and materials do not exclude participants with disabilities or those facing geographical and financial constraints (Council of Europe, 2015). Accessibility in this sense requires proactive design, where the needs of diverse groups are anticipated and addressed rather than treated as afterthoughts.

Equally important is the dimension of social safety. Young people must be assured that their contributions will be acknowledged and valued, and that they will not be subject to discrimination, stereotyping, or marginalisation within participatory settings. Establishing clear anti-discrimination policies and codes of conduct, alongside well-trained facilitators who can manage group dynamics effectively, is essential for fostering an inclusive environment. Without such measures, dominant voices may overshadow marginalised participants, reducing participation to a symbolic rather than substantive exercise.



Emotional safety constitutes another critical layer. Participation is meaningful only when young people feel able to express themselves without fear of judgement, ridicule, or dismissal. Many young people, particularly those from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds, may enter participatory spaces with experiences of exclusion that undermine their confidence. Creating an atmosphere of trust through confidence-building activities, small-group discussions, and peer-to-peer exchanges can mitigate these barriers. Respect for diverse opinions and the active encouragement of critical dialogue further reinforce young people's sense of belonging and legitimacy as contributors.

When physical, social, and emotional safety are integrated into the design of participatory processes, youth participation becomes transformative rather than tokenistic. Safe and accessible spaces do not simply enable presence; they empower young people to engage fully, to voice their perspectives with confidence, and to influence outcomes. In this way, creating multidimensional safety is not merely a logistical or ethical consideration but a democratic imperative that ensures participation processes are genuinely inclusive, equitable, and impactful.

Physical accessibility is the most immediate and visible requirement. Venues must be designed or adapted so that they do not exclude participants with disabilities. This involves providing barrier-free environments with ramps, lifts, accessible seating, and restrooms. It also requires consideration of materials used in activities. Resources should be available in a range of formats such as large print, simplified language, translations, subtitled videos, and sign language interpretation, ensuring that all participants can access information equitably. Practical arrangements such as transportation, catering, and accommodation are equally important. These elements must be planned in a way that removes hidden barriers, particularly for young people from rural areas, economically disadvantaged backgrounds, or those with specific cultural or dietary needs. By addressing these considerations, organisers signal a commitment to fairness and inclusion, demonstrating that opportunities for engagement are not determined by privilege or circumstance.



Creating socially safe spaces is equally essential. Participation is meaningful only when young people know that their contributions will be respected, valued, and taken seriously. This requires explicit and consistent efforts to prevent and address discrimination of any kind, including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and xenophobia. Social safety depends heavily on the role of facilitators, who must be skilled in fostering inclusive group dynamics. They are responsible for ensuring that no individual or group dominates discussions, that quieter voices are encouraged and supported, and that all perspectives are acknowledged. In this way, facilitators help to cultivate a culture of mutual respect where differences are not only tolerated but valued as enriching contributions to collective dialogue.

Emotional safety represents another vital aspect. Many young people, especially those from marginalised groups or with fewer opportunities, may hesitate to speak if they anticipate judgment, dismissal, or misunderstanding.

A supportive emotional environment is created when young people feel confident that their ideas, experiences, and concerns will be met with openness and respect. Facilitators can help to establish this climate of trust by using confidence-building activities, icebreakers, and small group discussions that reduce feelings of intimidation and encourage authentic self-expression. Emphasising active listening and demonstrating appreciation for diverse perspectives also helps participants feel validated, which in turn fosters greater willingness to engage.

When spaces are safe and accessible across all these dimensions, they become more than venues for dialogue; they become platforms for empowerment. Young people who feel physically comfortable, socially respected, and emotionally secure are more likely to take initiative, express their views confidently, and engage deeply in discussions on issues that affect their lives. This kind of environment ensures that participation is genuine rather than tokenistic and that the contributions of young people can meaningfully shape decision-making processes.

Safe and accessible spaces thus represent the foundation of inclusive democratic participation. They guarantee that young people are not only present in civic processes but that their involvement is substantive and transformative. By embedding these principles into the design of youth participation activities, societies strengthen democracy itself, making it more representative, resilient, and responsive to the diverse voices that constitute Europe's youth.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion in youth work

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are cornerstones of meaningful youth work and must be embedded in every aspect of participation. Youth work is not only about providing opportunities for young people to engage but also about ensuring that these opportunities are accessible, fair, and welcoming to all, regardless of their background or identity. To achieve this, youth work must actively challenge discrimination, promote tolerance, and create environments where diversity is embraced as a strength rather than treated as an obstacle.

Challenging discrimination requires deliberate action. Young people may encounter prejudice based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, and youth work has a responsibility to address these inequalities directly.





This means not only responding to incidents of discrimination when they occur but also designing programmes and activities that reduce stereotypes, encourage empathy, and highlight the value of diversity. Anti-discrimination policies should be clear and enforced consistently to create a culture of respect and safety.

Promoting tolerance is equally important. Youth work should encourage young people to listen to perspectives different from their own, engage in constructive dialogue, and learn from the experiences of others. Tolerance does not mean passive acceptance but rather an active commitment to coexistence, mutual respect, and collaboration. Activities such as intercultural exchanges, storytelling workshops, or community dialogues help young people to understand differences, discover common values, and build bridges across divides.

Embracing diversity means recognising and valuing the unique contributions that each individual brings to the group. Rather than treating difference as a challenge to be managed, youth work should highlight it as an opportunity for learning and growth. Diverse groups are more innovative, creative, and capable of addressing complex challenges because they bring together a wide range of experiences and perspectives. This requires facilitators to adopt inclusive methodologies that ensure every voice is heard and that participation is not dominated by a single group or perspective.

Facilitators themselves must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion effectively. Training in intercultural dialogue enables them to navigate cultural differences sensitively and to help young people appreciate the richness of multicultural environments. Gender sensitivity training ensures that youth activities are inclusive of all genders and challenge stereotypes that limit opportunities.

Knowledge of inclusive methodologies, such as using participatory methods, adapting activities to different learning styles, and ensuring accessibility for all, is also essential for creating equal opportunities in youth work.

When youth work actively promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion, its impact extends far beyond the immediate support it provides to individual young people. By ensuring that all young people, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances, can participate meaningfully, youth work contributes to the development of stronger and more cohesive communities. Inclusive practices foster mutual understanding by creating spaces where young people encounter different perspectives, learn to empathise with others, and recognise the shared values that connect them. In doing so, youth work becomes a mechanism for reducing prejudice, combating stereotypes, and challenging the structural inequalities that often divide societies.

The promotion of diversity and equity also strengthens social resilience by addressing inequalities at their roots. Youth work that incorporates inclusive practices helps to close participation gaps by ensuring that marginalised groups are not excluded from opportunities to contribute. This, in turn, reduces social tensions that arise from exclusion and alienation, building trust between different communities and strengthening the social fabric. When young people see themselves represented and valued in participatory spaces, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging, which reinforces social cohesion and stability at both local and national levels.

Beyond community-level benefits, the active promotion of diversity and inclusion prepares young people for their role as democratic citizens. By engaging in inclusive youth work practices, young people learn to recognise and respect not only their own rights but also the rights of others. They acquire the competences needed to navigate pluralistic societies, including intercultural dialogue, conflict resolution, and the ability to balance individual freedoms with collective responsibilities. These skills are crucial in contemporary Europe, where democratic cultures must be capable of accommodating increasing diversity while maintaining unity.

Ultimately, youth work that prioritises diversity, equity, and inclusion makes a profound contribution to the vitality of democracy. It nurtures a generation of young people who understand that democracy is not only about individual participation but also about ensuring that every voice is heard and valued.

By preparing young people to act as inclusive citizens who can collaborate across differences, youth work strengthens democratic culture and helps create societies rooted in equality, justice, and solidarity, where every individual is recognised as a legitimate contributor to the collective good.

Case studies from project partners (Spain, Hungary, Türkiye, Greece)

The case studies from the IncludeYOU project partners in Spain, Hungary, Türkiye, and Greece provide practical examples of how inclusive participation can be promoted in diverse contexts. Each partner has developed initiatives that address specific local needs while contributing to the broader aim of strengthening youth participation in democratic life. These examples illustrate how strategies for inclusion can be adapted and applied in different social, cultural, and political environments, offering inspiration and guidance for other organisations seeking to make youth engagement more meaningful and effective.

In Spain, ASEID has focused its efforts on social inclusion and employability programmes. These initiatives aim to support young people who face barriers to entering the labour market, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. By combining skills development with opportunities for civic engagement, ASEID helps young people improve their employability while also building confidence and competences as active citizens. Activities such as workshops, mentoring schemes, and community projects allow participants to strengthen both their professional and civic skills, ensuring that inclusion is addressed not only in economic terms but also in the sphere of democratic participation.

In Hungary, Fiatalok Egységben has placed intercultural dialogue and cultural projects at the heart of its work. Recognising the growing diversity of Hungarian society, the organisation creates spaces where young people from different cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds can come together to learn from one another, break down stereotypes, and build mutual understanding.





Through cultural exchanges, dialogue workshops, and creative projects, young people develop intercultural competences while gaining first-hand experience of how diversity can enrich communities. These initiatives show that intercultural dialogue is not only a tool for inclusion but also a pathway to more vibrant and democratic societies.

In Türkiye, Daphne Youth has developed initiatives to support refugees and marginalised youth, groups that often face multiple and overlapping barriers to participation. The organisation provides safe spaces where these young people can engage in learning, dialogue, and civic activities without fear of discrimination or exclusion. Programmes focus on empowerment, inclusion, and advocacy, enabling refugees and marginalised youth to build skills, share their perspectives, and contribute actively to the communities in which they live. This work demonstrates the importance of addressing the specific needs of vulnerable groups while promoting participation as a right for all young people.

In Greece, Fifty-Fifty has concentrated on building civic competences and creating youth councils that provide structured opportunities for young people to engage in decision-making processes. By organising training sessions, workshops, and dialogue platforms, the organisation equips young people with the skills needed to participate effectively in civic life. The youth councils serve as formal structures where young people can represent their peers, express their concerns, and work directly with local authorities to shape policies. This approach strengthens democratic culture at the local level and demonstrates the value of giving young people a recognised role in governance.



Together, these case studies highlight the diverse ways in which the IncludeYOU partners have promoted inclusion and participation. While each organisation responds to specific local challenges, they share a common commitment to empowering young people, reducing barriers to participation, and ensuring that democratic processes reflect the diversity of European youth. Their experiences provide valuable lessons and models that can be replicated or adapted in other contexts to create more inclusive and participatory societies.

Checklist for inclusive event design

Creating structured dialogue platforms is one of the most effective ways to ensure that young people are not only heard but also actively involved in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. Structured dialogue refers to organised and ongoing processes where young people and policymakers come together to exchange views, deliberate on issues, and work collaboratively to create solutions. Unlike informal or ad hoc consultations, structured dialogue platforms provide consistency, transparency, and follow-up, which are essential to building trust and achieving meaningful outcomes.

The first element of creating a structured dialogue platform is clarity of purpose. Both young people and policymakers need to understand why they are meeting, what issues are on the agenda, and what outcomes are expected. A clear purpose prevents discussions from becoming symbolic or superficial and ensures that participants feel their time and contributions are valued. This also helps organisers frame the dialogue around concrete themes such as education, climate change, employment, or inclusion, making the conversation relevant to both youth and decision-makers.

The second element is inclusivity in participation. A structured dialogue platform must be designed to welcome young people from diverse backgrounds, including those who are often marginalised or underrepresented.

This requires active outreach, accessible formats, and logistical support to remove barriers. Ensuring that a wide range of voices are present helps to enrich the dialogue with multiple perspectives and strengthens the legitimacy of the process. Facilitation is another crucial factor. Professional and well-trained facilitators are needed to guide the discussion, balance speaking time, and manage conflicts constructively. Their role is to create a safe and respectful environment where every participant feels confident to contribute. Facilitation also helps ensure that the dialogue is structured, focused, and productive rather than chaotic or dominated by a few voices.

A key characteristic of structured dialogue platforms is the commitment to follow-up. It is not enough for young people to share their views if no action is taken afterward. Policymakers must provide feedback on how youth input has been considered and integrated into policies or programmes. This creates accountability and demonstrates that participation is meaningful rather than tokenistic. Regular follow-up sessions can be used to assess progress, refine recommendations, and keep young people involved in the ongoing policy cycle.

Finally, sustainability must be built into the design of dialogue platforms. Structured dialogue should not be a one-off event but an ongoing process embedded in local, national, and European governance systems. This can involve creating youth councils, advisory boards, or permanent consultation mechanisms that ensure young people always have a seat at the table. Sustaining these platforms requires political will, dedicated resources, and continuous capacity-building for both youth and policymakers. By creating structured dialogue platforms that are purposeful, inclusive, well-facilitated, and sustained, societies can bridge the gap between young people and decision-makers. These platforms transform participation from symbolic gestures into genuine co-creation, allowing young people to play a meaningful role in shaping policies and strengthening democratic life.



Connecting Youth and Policymakers

Structured Dialogue Platforms

Structured dialogue platforms are a vital mechanism for ensuring that the voices of young people are systematically included in policymaking. They create organised spaces where young people and decision-makers can come together to discuss issues of mutual concern, deliberate on possible solutions, and co-create strategies for the future. Unlike informal or one-off consultations, structured dialogue platforms provide a clear process with defined objectives, trained facilitators, and mechanisms for accountability, making them a cornerstone of meaningful youth participation.

The effectiveness of structured dialogue lies in its organisation. Consultations must be carefully planned so that the topics discussed are relevant to both young people and policymakers. This means setting clear objectives, preparing participants in advance, and framing discussions around pressing social or political issues such as education, employment, sustainability, or inclusion. When young people see that their concerns are addressed directly, they are more likely to engage actively and constructively.

Facilitation plays a crucial role in structured dialogue. Skilled facilitators help ensure that conversations remain inclusive, balanced, and productive. They provide guidance on how discussions are conducted, encourage participation from quieter voices, and manage any disagreements in a constructive way. Facilitation also helps to keep the dialogue structured and goal-oriented, preventing it from being dominated by a few individuals or drifting into unrelated topics.

Another defining feature of structured dialogue is transparency and follow-up. Young people must know how their input will be used and whether it will have a real impact on policies and decisions. Policymakers are expected to provide feedback on which recommendations can be adopted, which require further discussion, and how they plan to integrate youth perspectives into their work. This creates trust and demonstrates that participation is more than symbolic. Without transparent follow-up, young people may feel discouraged or disillusioned, weakening their confidence in democratic processes.



Structured dialogue platforms also need to be embedded in long-term systems rather than treated as isolated events. When dialogue is institutionalised at local, national, and European levels, it becomes part of the policymaking culture. This might take the form of youth councils, advisory boards, or regular consultation forums where young people can consistently contribute to decision-making. In this way, structured dialogue builds continuity, allowing young people to track progress over time and remain engaged in shaping the policies that affect their lives.

By combining organised consultations, inclusive facilitation, and transparent follow-up, structured dialogue platforms ensure that young people are genuine partners in policymaking. They strengthen democratic systems by making them more representative, more accountable, and better able to respond to the needs and aspirations of younger generations.

Best practices for youth-policy co-creation

Best practices for youth-policy co-creation are grounded in the principle that young people must be treated as equal partners in shaping decisions that affect their lives. Co-creation goes beyond consultation by actively involving youth in every stage of the process, from identifying priorities to designing agendas, participating in discussions, and monitoring the implementation of outcomes. This approach builds trust, fosters ownership, and ensures that policies are more relevant, inclusive, and effective.

One of the most important practices is co-designing agendas with young people. Too often, policymakers set the topics for discussion without consulting youth, which can lead to a mismatch between what is discussed and what young people actually find relevant. When young people are involved in deciding the themes, questions, and objectives of a meeting or consultation, they are more invested in the process and more likely to contribute meaningfully. Co-designed agendas also ensure that the issues addressed reflect the real concerns of youth, whether these are climate change, education, employment, digitalisation, or mental health.

Another key practice is giving equal speaking time to all participants. Power imbalances between policymakers and young people can discourage youth from speaking openly or reduce their contributions to symbolic gestures. Structured facilitation and clear rules of engagement can help balance these dynamics, making sure that no one dominates the conversation and that every participant has the opportunity to express their views. Equal speaking time demonstrates respect for youth perspectives and reinforces the idea that young people are not secondary actors but essential contributors to the policymaking process.

Ensuring that feedback is acted upon is equally crucial. Young people quickly lose faith in participation processes if they feel that their contributions are ignored or dismissed. Policymakers must commit to carefully reviewing the input provided, explaining how it will be used, and taking tangible steps to integrate it into decisions. Even if certain recommendations cannot be implemented immediately, clear explanations and ongoing dialogue are necessary to maintain trust. Acting on feedback also means providing updates and involving young people in follow-up activities so they can see the impact of their engagement.





When these best practices are applied together, youth–policy co-creation becomes a genuine partnership rather than a token exercise. Co-designing agendas ensures relevance, equal speaking time guarantees fairness, and acting on feedback creates accountability. Together, they establish a culture of collaboration where young people feel empowered and policymakers benefit from the creativity, insight, and lived experiences of younger generations. This makes policies more responsive and societies more democratic.

Tools for policy debate and advocacy

Tools for policy debate and advocacy are essential instruments for ensuring that young people have structured, credible, and impactful ways of influencing decisions. They allow youth to move beyond symbolic participation and provide tangible input that policymakers can act upon. By using these tools, young people not only voice their concerns but also demonstrate their capacity to contribute to well-informed and constructive policymaking. Three of the most valuable approaches are position papers, citizens' assemblies, and public round tables.

Position papers are written documents that outline the perspectives, priorities, and recommendations of young people on specific issues. They serve as a bridge between youth dialogue and policy action because they capture key arguments in a format that policymakers are accustomed to using. Position papers typically include background information on the issue, evidence to support the youth perspective, and clear recommendations for action. For example, young people might develop a position paper on climate change, highlighting their concerns about environmental justice and proposing policies for sustainable energy use. Drafting such papers helps young participants develop competences in research, critical analysis, and persuasive communication, while also providing decision-makers with concise, evidence-based input that can inform policy processes.



Citizens' assemblies provide a deliberative forum where young people, alongside a diverse group of citizens, examine issues in depth and propose recommendations. These assemblies are structured to encourage informed discussion, often involving expert presentations, facilitated dialogue, and consensus-building exercises. The format ensures that participants move beyond surface-level opinions to consider complex issues carefully and collaboratively. For young people, participating in citizens' assemblies is an opportunity to engage on equal footing with adults, share generational perspectives, and influence recommendations that carry significant weight in policymaking. An example might be a citizens' assembly on digital rights, where youth participants bring crucial insights into online safety, social media use, and access to digital opportunities.

Public round tables create open and inclusive spaces where young people and policymakers interact directly. These events are typically organised around specific themes and are designed to be accessible, transparent, and interactive. Young people can share their views, present projects, and question decision-makers, while policymakers can explain their positions and listen to youth feedback in real time. Unlike formal hearings, round tables are often less rigid, allowing for dynamic exchanges that build trust and mutual understanding. For instance, a round table on youth employment could bring together young people facing job insecurity, local employers, and government representatives to discuss challenges and identify practical solutions.

Taken together, position papers, citizens' assemblies, and public round tables constitute a coherent and complementary toolkit of methods that provide young people with structured opportunities to shape public policy in meaningful ways. Each of these tools engages with a different dimension of the policymaking process, thereby ensuring that youth advocacy is multidimensional and robust. Position papers allow young people to articulate their views in carefully reasoned and evidence-based documents, providing policymakers with concrete recommendations that can be directly translated into legislative or programmatic initiatives. Citizens' assemblies foster collaborative deliberation, bringing together diverse participants to examine complex issues in depth and co-produce solutions that reflect collective perspectives and democratic legitimacy. Public round tables create accessible spaces for direct dialogue, enabling real-time exchange between youth and policymakers and building trust through interactive, less formalised engagement.



By combining these approaches, youth organisations and institutions can move beyond fragmented or symbolic participation and instead establish participatory processes that are credible, inclusive, and impactful. The written clarity of position papers, the deliberative legitimacy of citizens' assemblies, and the immediacy of round-table discussions each strengthen different aspects of youth advocacy. Together, they ensure that young people's contributions are not only heard as expressions of opinion but also systematically integrated into decision-making structures and policy outcomes. In this way, these methods not only empower young people as active citizens but also enhance the quality, fairness, and responsiveness of public policy.

Examples from IncludeYOU events (dialogues, round tables, debates)

The events organised under the IncludeYOU project demonstrate how carefully designed spaces for dialogue and debate can transform youth participation from a symbolic exercise into a meaningful and impactful process. Each partner country contributed its own approach, tailored to its local context, while staying true to the project's shared goal of strengthening democratic participation through direct engagement between youth and policymakers. Together, these examples highlight the value of diversity in formats and methods, showing that participation can be adapted to suit cultural, political, and social realities while still achieving the same fundamental aim: making youth voices central to decision-making.

In Greece, networking dialogues with local policymakers were set up as accessible forums where young people could sit across the table from elected officials, municipal staff, and community leaders.



Unlike traditional public hearings that often feel formal and intimidating, these networking dialogues used interactive methods such as small group discussions, storytelling, and Q&A sessions to make participation easier for young people. They provided opportunities for youth to articulate their priorities, ranging from environmental sustainability to education and employment, while policymakers could explain the practical constraints of governance. The dialogues built trust and accountability by showing young people how their input could influence municipal agendas and by reminding policymakers that youth perspectives are critical for creating forward-looking policies.

In Türkiye, smart youth engagement workshops took a more innovative and digital approach. Recognising the importance of online spaces in young people's daily lives, these workshops focused on teaching digital tools for advocacy, campaigning, and collaboration. Young participants experimented with creating online campaigns, using social media strategically, and exploring digital storytelling to highlight issues in their communities. The workshops also placed strong emphasis on digital safety and inclusivity, equipping youth with the knowledge to protect themselves online while ensuring that digital tools are accessible to those with fewer resources. These sessions empowered participants to see themselves as digital activists who can mobilise communities and influence decision-making far beyond their immediate environment.

In Spain, round tables connecting the European Union and youth were particularly impactful because they bridged the gap between local realities and European policymaking. These events brought EU representatives into direct conversation with young people, who had the chance to discuss how European policies on education, mobility, employment, and sustainability affect their lives.



The round tables allowed youth to question policymakers directly, express their concerns, and propose recommendations in a format that was both formal enough to influence decision-makers and informal enough to encourage genuine dialogue. For many participants, this experience made the European Union feel more tangible and accessible, helping them to understand that their voices can reach and shape policy at higher levels of governance.

In Hungary, policy debates with decision-makers offered young people a platform to practise structured argumentation while also demonstrating their capacity to engage with complex political and social issues. These debates focused on themes such as the transition to green economies, the future of education, and youth unemployment. Young people prepared arguments, presented evidence, and engaged in critical exchanges with policymakers, who were challenged to respond to the concerns of younger generations. The debates were highly educational for youth, helping them develop competences such as public speaking, critical thinking, and teamwork. They also challenged policymakers to take youth input seriously, as the debates showcased not only the passion but also the informed perspectives of young participants.

These examples illustrate the richness and diversity of approaches developed within the IncludeYOU project and highlight how different methods can complement one another in fostering youth participation. Networking dialogues at the local level provided accessible entry points for engagement, building trust between young people and local policymakers and demonstrating that proximity and familiarity are vital for sustained participation. Digital engagement workshops extended this participation into online spaces, showing how digital tools can broaden access, overcome geographical limitations, and appeal to younger generations who increasingly use digital platforms as their primary means of communication and civic expression.



Round tables offered opportunities for direct connection with decision-makers at the European level, ensuring that youth perspectives were not confined to local or national contexts but were integrated into broader policy debates that shape Europe as a whole. Policy debates, in turn, highlighted the analytical capacity, creativity, and determination of young people to engage critically with complex issues and to articulate well-reasoned arguments in public forums.

The combination of these formats demonstrates that no single method is sufficient to capture the full spectrum of youth participation. Different young people require different points of entry into democratic life, and a multiplicity of approaches allows for the inclusion of a wider range of voices. Some may feel most comfortable contributing in informal networking dialogues, while others may thrive in the structured setting of debates or the collaborative nature of round tables and assemblies. By adopting a variety of methods, the IncludeYOU project responds to diverse challenges such as accessibility, digital divides, and political disengagement and ensures that youth participation is not limited to one-off events or specific groups, but embedded across multiple levels of governance. Ultimately, this integrated approach reflects the principle that youth voices must be included at every stage and every level of democratic life, from the local to the European, and that inclusive, multi-method strategies are the most effective means of achieving this goal.

Practical template: “How to organise a Youth–Policy Round Table”

A Youth–Policy Round Table is one of the most effective practical tools for establishing structured dialogue between young people and decision-makers.

Unlike traditional consultations, which often position young people as passive respondents to predefined agendas, a round table is designed as a participatory and co-creative forum where youth and policymakers meet as equals. It provides a focused, inclusive, and results-oriented environment in which issues of mutual concern can be discussed openly, debated critically, and addressed collaboratively. The format of a round table emphasises dialogue rather than monologue, ensuring that young people are not merely listened to but are also able to shape the agenda, influence the direction of discussions, and contribute substantively to policy outcomes.

The effectiveness of a Youth–Policy Round Table depends on careful preparation and design. Organisers must ensure that participation is meaningful by selecting topics that are relevant to young people’s lived realities, by inviting a diverse group of participants, and by creating an environment where contributions are valued equally regardless of age, status, or background. Equal speaking opportunities and facilitation methods that balance power dynamics are essential to preventing tokenism and guaranteeing that every voice is heard. Inclusion also requires logistical considerations such as accessible venues, interpretation services, financial support for travel or accommodation, and hybrid participation options to ensure that young people with fewer opportunities can attend.

Most importantly, the success of a Youth–Policy Round Table lies in its ability to generate outcomes that extend beyond discussion and are translated into concrete actions. This requires systematic documentation of the dialogue, clear identification of policy recommendations, and agreed mechanisms for follow-up. Without such measures, there is a risk that the round table becomes a symbolic event rather than a transformative experience. A well-designed round table therefore closes the loop between participation and decision-making, showing young people that their contributions have real influence and demonstrating to policymakers the added value of youth perspectives.





As a participatory format, the Youth–Policy Round Table embodies the principles of inclusivity, accessibility, and co-creation that underpin the European Youth Goals, particularly Goal 9 on Space and Participation for All. It offers a replicable model that can be adapted to different levels of governance, from municipal councils to European institutions, and can be used to address a wide range of issues, from education and employment to digitalisation and climate change. By institutionalising such practices, stakeholders can ensure that youth participation is not occasional or symbolic, but systematic, structured, and impactful.

The first step is to define clear objectives. Organisers must identify the purpose of the round table and the specific outcomes they want to achieve. Objectives might include collecting youth input on a particular policy area, co-creating recommendations for a local initiative, or building stronger relationships between youth and local authorities. A well-defined objective sets the tone of the event, helps focus the discussion, and ensures that participants know why they are there and what is expected of them.

The second step is to invite a diverse group of young people and relevant policymakers. Diversity is essential to ensure that the round table reflects a broad range of perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds. Young people should be recruited from different age groups, social and cultural contexts, and geographic areas, with particular attention given to including those with fewer opportunities. Policymakers should be selected based on their relevance to the topic being discussed, such as municipal officials, members of parliament, or representatives of ministries. The presence of decision-makers with actual influence over the issues increases the credibility and impact of the round table.

The third step is to prepare a balanced agenda that allows both youth and policymakers to contribute equally. The agenda should be structured but flexible, combining plenary sessions with smaller group discussions to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak. Time should be allocated for youth to present their perspectives, for policymakers to explain their positions, and for joint discussions where participants can identify common ground and draft recommendations. Including interactive elements such as brainstorming sessions or breakout groups helps keep the dialogue dynamic and engaging. The fourth step is to use trained facilitators who can guide the discussion in an inclusive and respectful way. Facilitators play a critical role in ensuring that the dialogue is balanced, that all participants have equal speaking time, and that conflicts are managed constructively. They also help maintain focus on the objectives of the round table while encouraging creativity and open exchange. Ideally, facilitators should have experience in youth work and policy dialogue, as well as knowledge of intercultural and inclusive methodologies.

The fifth and final step is to document outcomes and ensure follow-up. Detailed notes or reports should be produced that capture the key points of discussion, the recommendations developed, and the commitments made by policymakers. These outcomes should be shared with all participants after the event to maintain transparency and accountability. Equally important is to ensure follow-up, whether through progress updates, additional meetings, or integration of recommendations into actual policies. Following up demonstrates that the round table was not just a symbolic exercise but a meaningful step in shaping decisions. By following these steps, organisers can create Youth–Policy Round Tables that are inclusive, productive, and impactful. Such events not only empower young people to share their perspectives but also strengthen democratic culture by fostering dialogue, building trust, and ensuring that youth voices are integrated into policy processes at every level.

Digital Tools for Smart Youth Engagement

The role of digitalisation in youth participation

The role of digitalisation in youth participation has become increasingly significant in recent years, as digital tools provide new ways for young people to engage in civic and democratic life. Digital platforms make it possible to overcome geographical boundaries, allowing youth from rural areas, small towns, and different countries to participate in discussions and initiatives that were previously out of reach.

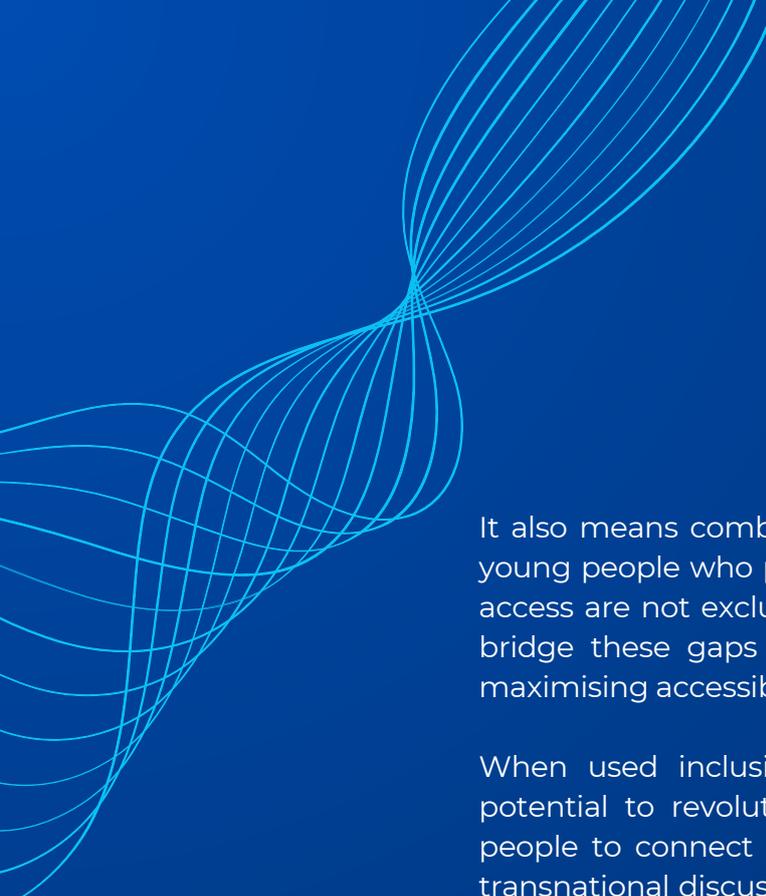
Online consultations, webinars, virtual workshops, and collaborative platforms have opened the door to a broader and more diverse range of voices, making participation more accessible to young people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to engage.

Digitalisation also aligns closely with the ways in which young people already communicate, organise, and express themselves. Social media platforms, online campaigns, and digital storytelling have become powerful tools for youth activism, enabling young people to raise awareness, build communities, and influence decision-making in real time. These tools amplify youth voices by giving them visibility on issues such as climate change, gender equality, mental health, and human rights, and they allow young people to connect across borders, forming networks that strengthen solidarity and cooperation at the European and global levels.

However, while digital tools expand participation opportunities, they also raise challenges that must be addressed to ensure inclusivity. Not all young people have equal access to the internet, devices, or the digital literacy skills needed to participate effectively. This digital divide can exclude rural youth, young people from low-income backgrounds, or those with limited technical experience, reinforcing existing inequalities. Moreover, digital spaces are not always safe or welcoming. Online harassment, misinformation, and a lack of digital privacy protections can discourage meaningful participation and leave young people vulnerable.

For digitalisation to truly support youth participation, it must be implemented in an inclusive and responsible way. This means ensuring affordable and reliable access to digital tools, providing training to develop digital competences, and creating safe online environments where young people can engage without fear of discrimination or exploitation.





It also means combining digital and offline participation, so that young people who prefer face-to-face engagement or lack digital access are not excluded. Hybrid models of participation can help bridge these gaps by blending online and in-person activities, maximising accessibility and reach.

When used inclusively and responsibly, digitalisation has the potential to revolutionise youth participation. It enables young people to connect with decision-makers more easily, engage in transnational discussions, and take collective action on issues that matter to them. At the same time, it challenges institutions to adapt to new forms of engagement and to meet young people where they already are: in digital spaces. By embracing digital tools while addressing their limitations, societies can make youth participation more dynamic, accessible, and future-oriented.

Social media and online campaigns for civic engagement

Social media and online campaigns have emerged as central instruments of civic engagement, providing young people with innovative and far-reaching avenues to mobilise communities, raise awareness, and influence decision-making processes. Unlike traditional modes of political communication, which often rely on formal structures and institutional channels, social media platforms offer immediacy, accessibility, and creativity, enabling youth to become active producers of content and shapers of discourse rather than passive consumers. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook allow young people to disseminate messages rapidly, reaching audiences that extend far beyond their immediate social networks. This capacity to bypass traditional gatekeepers and connect directly with diverse publics makes social media especially effective for amplifying youth voices that might otherwise remain marginalised.



The appeal of these platforms lies in their interactivity and adaptability to the communication styles of younger generations. Social media enables youth to employ visual, narrative, and participatory formats—ranging from short videos and memes to live-streamed discussions and interactive polls—that resonate with peers and attract attention from broader audiences. Campaigns built around hashtags, challenges, or viral content can spark large-scale mobilisation in a matter of hours, drawing attention to issues that may have been overlooked by mainstream media or formal political actors. In this way, social media provides not only a channel for expression but also a mechanism for visibility and agenda-setting in public debates.

The civic potential of online campaigns is further enhanced by their capacity to connect local experiences with global movements. Young people can use digital platforms to highlight issues in their communities while linking them to broader struggles for climate justice, gender equality, anti-racism, or human rights. This creates transnational solidarity and fosters a sense of belonging to global civic networks. At the same time, the ability to engage directly with decision-makers through tagging, commenting, or organising digital petitions increases the accountability of political actors, demonstrating that social media is not only a tool for awareness-raising but also a means of exerting pressure for policy change.

Importantly, online campaigns also provide opportunities for young people with fewer resources to participate in civic life. Unlike traditional political engagement, which often requires physical presence or financial means, digital activism can be conducted from virtually anywhere with an internet connection.



This opens doors for rural youth, migrants, or young people with disabilities to join civic conversations and shape narratives. However, it also highlights the importance of addressing digital divides, ensuring that inequalities in access to technology and digital literacy do not reproduce existing patterns of exclusion.

By leveraging the immediacy, creativity, and reach of social media, young people are transforming the landscape of civic engagement. They are redefining what political communication looks like, making it more interactive, accessible, and youth-driven, and demonstrating their capacity to influence both public opinion and institutional decision-making. In this way, social media and online campaigns represent not only tools for participation but also symbols of a new, networked form of democracy where youth agency is amplified and made visible. Youth-led campaigns can mobilise communities by tapping into shared values, local concerns, or global movements. A well-designed campaign can encourage peers to volunteer, attend events, sign petitions, or take collective action on pressing issues such as climate change, human rights, or gender equality. Because social media enables rapid sharing and viral communication, even small groups of young people can generate significant impact when their message resonates broadly. Campaigns such as climate strikes, digital petitions, or hashtag movements demonstrate how youth can use online spaces to organise large-scale participation that might otherwise be impossible to achieve through offline methods alone.

Raising awareness is another critical function of social media campaigns. Young people can use videos, graphics, podcasts, and blogs to explain complex issues in ways that are accessible and relatable to their peers. Campaigns often challenge dominant narratives by bringing attention to marginalised voices and overlooked topics, ensuring that youth perspectives are visible in public discourse. For example, short-form videos on platforms like TikTok have been used to explain policy changes, highlight discrimination, or share experiences of activism, reaching millions of viewers who might not engage with traditional policy debates.

Beyond awareness, online campaigns can also influence decision-makers. Policymakers increasingly pay attention to public opinion expressed on social media, especially when campaigns gain widespread traction or media coverage. Youth-led digital advocacy can pressure institutions to respond, whether by opening consultations, changing policies, or committing to specific reforms. For instance, campaigns demanding more ambitious climate action or addressing education reforms have successfully drawn responses from political leaders, demonstrating the power of youth activism in digital spaces.

However, social media campaigns also face challenges. Online activism can sometimes be criticised as “clicktivism,” where engagement is limited to likes or shares without deeper involvement. Misinformation, online hate, and unequal access to digital tools can also limit the inclusivity and effectiveness of campaigns. To overcome these challenges, youth-led initiatives must combine online mobilisation with offline actions, such as workshops, community projects, or meetings with decision-makers. This blended approach ensures that digital visibility translates into real-world impact and policy change.

When used strategically, social media and online campaigns allow young people to amplify their voices, connect across borders, and become visible actors in democratic life. They provide creative, flexible, and highly effective ways of engaging in civic action, making them indispensable tools for modern youth participation.



Online platforms for debate and collaboration

Online platforms for debate and collaboration have become indispensable for modern youth participation, providing spaces where young people can exchange ideas, deliberate on issues, and work collectively on solutions regardless of physical location. These platforms complement face-to-face engagement and often make it possible to reach broader and more diverse groups, including those who might face barriers to attending in-person events. By offering structured, accessible, and interactive environments, online platforms strengthen democratic participation and allow youth to connect with peers, organisations, and policymakers at local, national, and European levels.

The EU Youth Dialogue platforms represent one of the most prominent examples of how online spaces can be used to engage young people across Europe. These platforms host consultations, surveys, and interactive discussions that gather youth perspectives on key policy areas linked to the European Youth Goals. By providing opportunities for young people to share their views in multiple languages and formats, the EU Youth Dialogue platforms ensure inclusivity and transparency. Importantly, the feedback collected is integrated into European policymaking processes, which demonstrates to young participants that their input has real impact at the institutional level.

Open-source collaboration tools also play a key role in enabling youth to co-create ideas and initiatives online. Tools such as shared document platforms, project management apps, and collaborative whiteboards allow groups of young people to work together on drafting position papers, developing campaign strategies, or designing local projects. These tools encourage teamwork across geographical and cultural boundaries, making it easier to organise transnational initiatives or prepare collective input for consultations. Open-source solutions are particularly valuable because they are cost-effective, adaptable, and accessible, helping to reduce barriers for youth organisations with limited resources.

Local online youth councils are another example of how digital platforms can strengthen collaboration and representation at the community level. These councils provide young people with a virtual space to share their perspectives on local issues, propose recommendations, and communicate directly with municipal authorities.



Online councils can be especially useful in rural or remote areas where face-to-face meetings are more difficult to arrange. They also allow for continuous participation, enabling young people to contribute ideas and feedback outside of traditional meeting schedules. In some cases, these councils have developed into hybrid models, combining digital discussions with in-person gatherings to maximise accessibility and impact.

By using platforms such as EU Youth Dialogue systems, open-source collaboration tools, and local online youth councils, young people can engage in meaningful dialogue, organise initiatives, and influence policies. These platforms extend the reach of participation, ensure that youth voices are heard more consistently, and foster collaboration across borders and generations. At the same time, they highlight the need for digital inclusivity and safe online environments so that participation remains accessible and respectful for all.

Tools for hybrid or remote youth participation

Tools for hybrid or remote youth participation are essential in today's context, as they combine the strengths of in-person interaction with the flexibility of digital engagement. By blending physical and online formats, these tools make participation more inclusive and accessible, allowing young people from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations to take part in democratic processes.

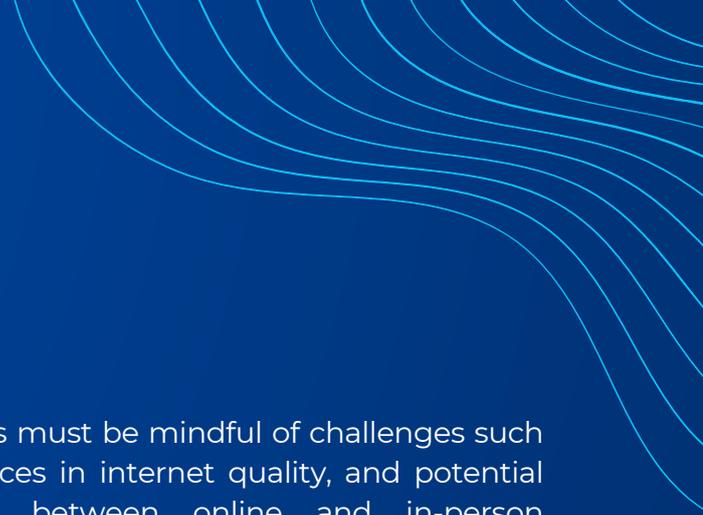
Hybrid and remote methods are particularly important for those who face barriers such as travel costs, physical disabilities, or limited time availability, as they ensure that no one is excluded from contributing.

Hybrid participation tools include video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet, which can be used to connect participants across regions during live events. These platforms allow young people to attend round tables, policy debates, or training sessions virtually while others join in person. Features such as breakout rooms, polls, and chat functions make discussions interactive and give participants multiple ways to express themselves. When combined with physical events, they create opportunities for real-time collaboration between participants in different settings, bridging distances while maintaining the energy of face-to-face dialogue.

Remote collaboration tools further support hybrid participation by enabling ongoing work beyond the event itself. Shared document platforms such as Google Workspace or Nextcloud, project management tools like Trello or Asana, and discussion boards such as Slack or Discord allow young people to co-create documents, plan campaigns, and maintain dialogue long after an event has ended. These tools make it possible to sustain participation over time, ensuring that engagement is not limited to a single meeting but becomes an ongoing process of collaboration and co-creation.

Accessibility is another key benefit of hybrid participation. For example, live streaming events on social media or YouTube ensures that a wider audience can observe and learn from discussions even if they are not active participants. Subtitles, sign language interpretation, or multilingual chat moderation can further increase accessibility for diverse audiences. Hybrid tools also allow for flexible engagement, as young people can choose the level of involvement that suits them whether actively contributing during sessions or following updates asynchronously.





At the same time, organisers must be mindful of challenges such as digital exclusion, differences in internet quality, and potential feelings of disconnection between online and in-person participants. To address these issues, hybrid events should be carefully designed so that online participants are not treated as secondary but are fully integrated into discussions. For example, facilitators can ensure equal speaking time for online voices, use digital polling to include everyone in decision-making, and create joint working groups that mix in-person and remote participants.

By combining physical and digital formats, hybrid and remote tools not only extend the reach of youth participation but also make it more resilient and adaptable. They ensure that young people can engage regardless of their circumstances, help maintain participation over the long term, and demonstrate that democratic dialogue can thrive in both physical and digital spaces.

Digital safety and inclusion considerations

Digital safety and inclusion considerations are fundamental when using online tools for youth participation. While digital spaces create exciting opportunities for engagement, they also carry risks that can discourage young people from contributing or even expose them to harm. To ensure that digital participation is both safe and inclusive, organisers and youth workers must establish clear safeguards, address the challenges of misinformation, and actively support young people who face barriers to accessing digital tools.

Safeguarding online privacy is the first priority. Young people need to feel secure when joining online consultations, debates, or collaborative platforms. This means protecting their personal data, ensuring compliance with regulations such as GDPR, and being transparent about how information will be used. Secure platforms with strong privacy settings should always be chosen, and participants must be informed about their rights regarding consent and data sharing.



Training young people on safe digital practices such as creating strong passwords, recognising phishing attempts, and managing their online identity further empowers them to protect themselves in digital environments. Countering misinformation is another crucial element of digital safety. The speed and reach of online communication mean that false information can spread quickly, undermining trust and distorting debates. Young people involved in civic participation must be equipped with media literacy skills to critically evaluate sources, check facts, and recognise manipulative content. Organisers can also take responsibility by moderating online discussions, providing verified resources, and encouraging a culture of respectful, evidence-based dialogue. When youth are confident in navigating online information, they are better able to participate constructively and resist harmful narratives.

Providing access for digitally disadvantaged youth is key to ensuring inclusion. Not all young people have equal access to devices, stable internet, or digital literacy skills, which can create a divide between those who can participate and those who cannot. To address this, organisers should consider offering support such as loaning devices, providing internet stipends, or creating local hubs where disadvantaged youth can join digital events. Activities should also be designed to accommodate varying levels of digital literacy, offering guidance and support for those less experienced with online tools. This ensures that digital participation opportunities are not limited to already privileged groups but are open to all.

By safeguarding online privacy, countering misinformation, and addressing digital inequalities, organisers can make digital youth participation safe, inclusive, and empowering. These considerations not only protect young people but also build trust, strengthen engagement, and ensure that digital tools fulfil their potential as vehicles for democratic participation.

Quality Youth Work and Sustainability

Principles of Effective Youth Work

The principles of effective youth work in democratic participation are grounded in the values of participation, empowerment, inclusivity, and long-term impact. These principles ensure that youth work does not only create temporary opportunities for engagement but also builds lasting structures, competences, and confidence that enable young people to play an active role in shaping their societies. When applied consistently, these principles transform youth work into a powerful driver of democracy and social cohesion.



Participation is the first and most essential principle. Effective youth work is based on the idea that young people should not be passive recipients of activities but active contributors and decision-makers. This means involving youth in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects, giving them real ownership of processes, and ensuring that their voices shape outcomes. Participation builds trust between young people and institutions, demonstrates respect for youth perspectives, and ensures that initiatives are relevant to the actual needs of young people. Empowerment is the second core principle. Youth work should provide young people with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to take initiative and influence change. Empowerment comes through non-formal education, capacity-building, mentoring, and practical experiences such as youth-led projects or policy dialogues. By strengthening competences like leadership, critical thinking, and communication, youth work equips young people to become not only participants but also leaders in democratic life. Empowerment also means supporting young people to believe in their own ability to make a difference and to see themselves as agents of change.

Inclusivity is another key principle that ensures no young person is left behind. Effective youth work recognises the diversity of young people and actively works to remove barriers for those who are marginalised or underrepresented, such as young people from rural areas, minority communities, migrants, refugees, or those with disabilities. Inclusivity means creating safe and welcoming spaces, using accessible methods, and celebrating diversity as a strength. It also requires continuous reflection to challenge discrimination and ensure equality in all youth work practices.



Finally, long-term impact is what distinguishes meaningful youth work from short-term activities. Effective youth work is not only about organising events or workshops but about creating sustainable processes that leave a lasting imprint on young people and their communities. This involves building structures such as youth councils, advisory boards, or networks that endure beyond individual projects. It also means focusing on the transferability of competences, so that the skills gained in one activity can be applied in future contexts, strengthening lifelong engagement in civic life.

Together, these principles form the foundation of youth work that truly supports democratic participation. By fostering participation, empowerment, inclusivity, and long-term impact, youth work ensures that young people are not only involved in isolated activities but are consistently prepared and supported to shape the democratic societies of today and tomorrow.

Training Youth Workers

Training youth workers is essential to ensure that they can effectively support young people's participation in democratic life. Youth workers are often the bridge between young people and institutions, and their role goes beyond organising activities they are facilitators of dialogue, mentors, and advocates for inclusion. To perform this role successfully, they require specific training in dialogue facilitation, non-formal education methods, conflict management, and intercultural sensitivity.

Dialogue facilitation is one of the most important skills for youth workers. It enables them to create spaces where young people feel comfortable expressing their views, where all voices are heard, and where discussions remain structured and productive.



Training in facilitation equips youth workers to manage group dynamics, ensure balanced participation, and encourage critical reflection. It also helps them guide conversations between youth and policymakers, making sure that exchanges remain respectful and focused while allowing young people to take the lead in shaping outcomes.

Non-formal education (NFE) methods are central to youth participation, and youth workers need to be skilled in applying them effectively. Unlike formal education, NFE emphasises experiential learning, reflection, and active involvement. Training in NFE methods prepares youth workers to design workshops, simulations, role plays, and other interactive activities that build competences such as leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving. These methods make learning engaging and relevant, while also empowering young people to take initiative and connect their experiences to broader civic and democratic contexts.

Conflict management is another crucial area of training. Youth participation often brings together diverse groups with different perspectives, which can lead to disagreements or tensions.

Well-trained youth workers can identify potential sources of conflict early, create safe environments for discussion, and use conflicts as opportunities for learning rather than division. Training in conflict resolution techniques, mediation, and constructive communication ensures that disagreements are handled in ways that strengthen relationships and deepen understanding instead of creating barriers.

Finally, intercultural sensitivity is vital in today's diverse societies. Youth workers must be able to work effectively with young people from different cultural, ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. Training in intercultural dialogue, anti-discrimination practices, and inclusive methodologies enables youth workers to challenge stereotypes, foster tolerance, and celebrate diversity.



This competence is particularly important when working with marginalised youth or in international projects, where cultural differences can enrich the process but also require careful navigation.

By developing strong capacities in dialogue facilitation, non-formal education, conflict management, and intercultural sensitivity, youth workers are better equipped to guide young people in meaningful democratic participation. These skills allow them to create inclusive spaces, support competence development, and ensure that youth voices are effectively connected to policy processes. In this way, the training of youth workers directly contributes to stronger, more inclusive, and more resilient democratic systems.

Non-Formal Methods for Long-Term Impact

Non-formal methods for long-term impact are central to youth work because they provide young people with learning experiences that extend well beyond the duration of individual projects. Unlike traditional forms of education, which are often formal, standardised, and outcome-driven, non-formal education emphasises active participation, reflection, creativity, and the practical application of skills. These approaches are particularly suited to civic and democratic engagement, as they focus on equipping young people with competences that are not only useful in educational or professional settings but also essential for lifelong citizenship. Methods such as peer learning, storytelling, and simulations are especially effective because they embed competences in ways that are memorable, meaningful, and transferable, ensuring that young people can continue to draw on them in future contexts of civic and democratic life.

Peer learning represents one of the most powerful non-formal methods for creating sustainable impact. It is built on the principle that learning is often more effective and empowering when it takes place among equals, rather than through hierarchical teacher–student relationships. When young people learn from one another, the process becomes more relatable, authentic, and motivational. Peer learning encourages participants to exchange experiences, reflect on challenges, and support one another in building new competences. For example, young people may co-facilitate a workshop, mentor peers in areas such as project management, or collaborate on advocacy campaigns.

Through this process, they not only develop skills in communication, teamwork, and leadership but also foster solidarity, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. The sustainability of this method lies in its ability to create networks of ongoing exchange, ensuring that learning continues within youth communities long after a single project has ended.

Storytelling is another method with deep and lasting influence because of its unique ability to link personal experience with broader social and political realities. Stories are powerful tools for meaning-making, allowing young people to frame their own experiences in ways that resonate with others and connect to collective issues. By telling their stories or listening to the stories of others, participants develop empathy, challenge stereotypes, and recognise the richness of diverse perspectives. Storytelling also builds practical competences such as creativity, public speaking, and self-confidence—skills that are indispensable for active citizenship. The impact of storytelling endures because stories are inherently memorable; they not only capture attention in the moment but also inspire reflection and action long after the event itself has concluded.





Simulations provide young people with immersive and hands-on opportunities to experience democratic processes and policymaking within a safe and controlled environment. Activities such as mock European Parliament sessions, model United Nations debates, or municipal council role plays enable participants to take on the roles of decision-makers, advocates, or community stakeholders. By “living” these roles, young people gain a deeper understanding of governance, political negotiation, and compromise. Simulations encourage critical thinking, leadership, and analytical reasoning, while also allowing participants to practice persuasion, advocacy, and collaborative problem-solving. The competences developed through simulations are directly transferable to real-world contexts, meaning that the learning continues to benefit young people as they assume active roles in civic and political life.

Peer learning, storytelling, and simulations exemplify how non-formal methods achieve long-term impact. Unlike short-term interventions that may only create temporary awareness, these methods embed competences in experiential, personal, and engaging ways that are difficult to forget and easy to apply. By combining knowledge with lived experience, and by placing agency in the hands of young people, non-formal education fosters confidence, motivation, and commitment to democratic participation. In doing so, it ensures that youth engagement is not a one-time activity but part of a lifelong journey of active citizenship and inclusive democracy.

Building Replicable Models

Building replicable models of youth participation is a crucial step in ensuring that the impact of individual projects extends beyond their immediate duration and contributes to the establishment of a lasting democratic culture. Replicable models function as adaptable frameworks that can be applied across diverse contexts local, national, or European while consistently upholding the principles of inclusion, empowerment, and meaningful engagement.

Their strength lies in their ability to balance flexibility with structure: they provide tested methods that can be transferred and scaled while allowing space for adaptation to local needs, cultural specificities, and institutional contexts.

Youth councils represent one of the most established models of structured participation. These councils create formal channels through which young people can advise local or national authorities, propose policy initiatives, and articulate the needs of their peers. Their replicability derives from their clear governance structures and defined mandates, which can be adjusted according to the scale of implementation, whether in a municipality, a school, or a national ministry.

Participation labs offer another innovative model, functioning as experimental spaces where young people, policymakers, and other stakeholders collaborate to address complex issues. These labs are particularly effective in encouraging co-creation, fostering innovative problem-solving, and strengthening mutual trust between youth and institutions. Their replicability stems from their process-oriented design, which emphasises dialogue, collaboration, and the joint production of policy recommendations, making them adaptable to a wide range of policy areas and governance levels.

Structured dialogues represent a third key model, providing organised platforms for regular and transparent communication between youth and decision-makers. By institutionalising consultation processes, structured dialogues prevent youth engagement from being sporadic or symbolic and instead embed it into the policy cycle. The European Union's Youth Dialogue process itself provides a strong example of how structured dialogues can be scaled across countries and contexts while retaining a common methodology rooted in inclusivity and democratic accountability.

The development of replicable models ensures that youth participation is not confined to isolated initiatives but becomes a systemic feature of governance. Such models generate long-term sustainability by embedding youth voices into decision-making processes, by institutionalising good practices, and by offering guidance to new actors seeking to promote participation. Most importantly, they guarantee that the principles of inclusivity, empowerment, and meaningful engagement remain central, ensuring that youth participation is both consistent and transformative across different levels of society.

Youth councils provide a formal structure where young people can represent their peers, express concerns, and collaborate directly with policymakers. These councils can be established at municipal, regional, or national levels, adapting to the specific governance systems of each community. When designed with inclusivity in mind, youth councils ensure that diverse groups are represented, including those from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds. Their strength as a replicable model lies in their flexibility: they can vary in size, scope, and mandate but always remain rooted in the principle of granting young people a meaningful role in shaping policies.

Participation labs are another innovative model that encourages experimentation and creativity in youth engagement. These labs bring together young people, decision-makers, and civil society actors to jointly develop solutions to pressing issues. Using interactive and collaborative methods such as design thinking, brainstorming, and prototyping, participation labs allow participants to explore challenges from new perspectives and generate innovative policy proposals. They are highly adaptable to a wide range of themes including climate action, digital transformation, employment, or social inclusion, and can be replicated in different contexts as dynamic platforms for dialogue and co-creation.

Structured dialogues form a third model, providing organised and systematic opportunities for young people and policymakers to exchange views and collaborate. Whether conducted as round tables, focus groups, or online consultations, structured dialogues create continuity and accountability by ensuring that youth input is collected, documented, and acted upon. They are adaptable to various governance levels, from local municipalities to European institutions, and to diverse policy areas depending on the needs of the community. The replicable value of this model lies in its clear structure, which combines inclusivity, skilled facilitation, and consistent follow-up, making it a reliable method for embedding youth voices in decision-making.





By developing youth councils, participation labs, and structured dialogues as adaptable frameworks, youth participation can shift from being project-based to becoming a sustainable and integral part of governance systems. These replicable models allow effective practices to be transferred across regions and countries, ensuring innovation while safeguarding core values of democracy and inclusion. They also provide continuity so that when projects such as IncludeYOU conclude, their impact does not end but continues through lasting structures that empower young people to shape the future of their communities and societies.

Sustainability Strategies

Sustainability strategies are essential to ensure that the outcomes of projects like IncludeYOU continue to have an impact long after their formal funding and activities come to an end. Without a clear plan for sustainability, youth participation risks being seen as temporary or symbolic, rather than as a lasting contribution to democratic life. Embedding results in policy, creating permanent structures for youth involvement, and building strong networks across Europe are three key strategies that help secure continuity and long-term relevance.

Embedding outcomes in local policy is one of the most effective ways to sustain impact. When recommendations, practices, or models developed during a project are integrated into municipal, regional, or national policies, they gain legitimacy and permanence. For example, youth councils or consultation frameworks piloted during a project can be formally adopted by local authorities and included in long-term strategies for governance. Embedding outcomes in policy also ensures that youth participation is not dependent on the enthusiasm of individual project leaders but becomes a structural part of how institutions operate.

Creating permanent youth structures such as councils, advisory boards, or forums represents a critical measure for ensuring the sustainability of youth participation in democratic life.



Unlike temporary initiatives or project-based activities, which often conclude once funding ends, permanent structures institutionalise youth engagement and provide young people with ongoing opportunities to interact with decision-makers and contribute to policy processes. These bodies ensure that youth voices are not confined to occasional consultations but are instead embedded within the everyday functioning of governance systems.

Once established, permanent youth structures can operate independently of project cycles and external funding, thereby ensuring continuity and stability in youth engagement. They provide a formal and recognised platform where young people can express their perspectives, articulate policy priorities, and hold decision-makers accountable. For example, municipal youth councils can influence local governance on issues such as urban planning, education, or leisure spaces, while national youth advisory boards can contribute to shaping youth strategies, education reforms, or labour market policies. In this way, permanent structures link young people's lived experiences with institutional decision-making, bridging the gap between grassroots realities and policy frameworks.

For these structures to be effective and sustainable, certain conditions must be met. First, they need to be adequately resourced, both financially and institutionally, to ensure they can function beyond symbolic representation. Without dedicated budgets, professional support, and logistical infrastructure, such bodies risk becoming ineffective or tokenistic. Second, they must be inclusive of diverse groups of young people, particularly those who are underrepresented due to social, economic, cultural, or geographical barriers.



Inclusivity strengthens the legitimacy of these structures by ensuring that they reflect the diversity of the youth population. Third, permanent youth structures must be granted real influence over decision-making processes rather than serving as advisory bodies without impact. Their recommendations should be seriously considered, integrated into policymaking, and subject to follow-up mechanisms that demonstrate accountability.

By meeting these conditions, permanent youth structures demonstrate that participation is not a one-off event but a continuous right and responsibility. They symbolise a shift from temporary engagement to systemic inclusion, reinforcing democratic culture by positioning young people as partners rather than passive beneficiaries. Over time, such structures contribute to building trust between youth and institutions, increasing political legitimacy, and fostering a generation of active citizens who are equipped to shape the future of their societies.

Networking across Europe strengthens sustainability by connecting local initiatives to broader movements and resources. European networks provide opportunities for sharing good practices, exchanging ideas, and building solidarity among young people and youth organisations from different countries. They also help amplify youth voices at the European level, ensuring that local experiences and concerns feed into wider policy discussions. Networks create resilience by offering support, visibility, and opportunities for collaboration that extend beyond individual projects or communities.

Together, these sustainability strategies ensure that youth participation remains meaningful and impactful over time. By embedding outcomes in policy, creating permanent youth structures, and fostering European networks, projects like IncludeYOU can leave behind lasting legacies that continue to empower young people and strengthen democratic culture well into the future.

Practical Resources

Templates (debate guidelines, event evaluation forms, feedback questionnaires)

Templates are practical resources that make youth participation activities more structured, consistent, and impactful. They provide organisers with ready-to-use tools that can be adapted to different contexts, ensuring that events are not only well-prepared but also inclusive and results-oriented. By standardising key processes, templates contribute to fairness, transparency, and accountability, while also supporting learning and reflection among young people. Among the most useful templates for youth engagement are debate guidelines, event evaluation forms, and feedback questionnaires, each of which serves a distinct and complementary function.

Debate guidelines are essential for fostering fair, respectful, and constructive discussions. They establish the rules of engagement, such as time limits for speakers, respectful language, and the roles of moderators and participants. These guidelines ensure that every individual has an equal opportunity to speak, that the discussion remains focused on substantive issues, and that disagreements are managed productively rather than escalating into conflict. For young people, guidelines also create a sense of security and predictability, clarifying expectations and helping them to participate more effectively. A comprehensive debate template might include a sequence of opening statements, rebuttals, audience questions, and closing remarks, all of which encourage critical thinking, active listening, and structured dialogue.

Event evaluation forms are another important tool because they allow participants to reflect on their experiences and provide systematic feedback on both the content and the process of the event.



These forms typically address issues such as the relevance of the topics discussed, the inclusivity of the environment, the effectiveness of facilitation, and the impact of the activities on participants' knowledge, confidence, and motivation. By collecting this data, organisers can identify strengths and weaknesses, improve the design of future activities, and demonstrate the effectiveness of youth participation initiatives to funders, institutions, and policymakers. Evaluation forms therefore contribute not only to learning but also to accountability and continuous improvement.

Feedback questionnaires complement evaluation forms by placing greater emphasis on the perspectives and suggestions of young participants. While evaluation forms often focus on the organiser's objectives, feedback questionnaires invite young people to express what they personally found meaningful, what challenges they encountered, and how they envision better participation in the future. These questionnaires can be administered immediately after an event or at later stages to assess long-term impact. They often combine closed questions, which provide measurable data, with open questions, which give space for young people's ideas and proposals. In this way, feedback questionnaires turn participants into co-creators of future initiatives, ensuring that their voices are directly integrated into programme design.

Templates such as debate guidelines, evaluation forms, and feedback questionnaires play a pivotal role in transforming youth participation activities from isolated or ad hoc events into structured, inclusive, and democratic learning processes. Their value lies not only in providing organisational clarity but also in embedding principles of fairness, accountability, and reflection into participatory practices. By standardising procedures and offering clear frameworks for interaction, templates ensure that all participants regardless of their background, prior experience, or confidence level have an equal opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

Debate guidelines, for instance, formalise the rules of engagement by establishing structures for turn-taking, respectful dialogue, and balanced participation. This reduces the risk of dominance by a few voices and empowers quieter participants to engage with confidence. Similarly, evaluation forms enable participants to reflect critically on the quality of the process, the inclusivity of the environment, and the impact of the activity on their civic competences.



Feedback questionnaires complement this by giving young people a direct channel to articulate their perspectives and suggest improvements, thereby embedding responsiveness and continuous development into the practice of youth work.

The systematic use of templates goes beyond logistical convenience. It fosters a culture of reflection in which organisers and participants alike recognise that democratic participation is a dynamic process requiring constant learning, adjustment, and improvement.

Templates also promote responsiveness by ensuring that the experiences and evaluations of participants directly inform the design of future initiatives. In doing so, they strengthen the sense of shared ownership, as young people see their input not only influencing the content of activities but also shaping the very structures in which they engage.

By embedding templates into practice, organisers create more than efficient events; they contribute to the long-term sustainability of youth participation. Templates help institutionalise good practice, ensuring that principles of inclusivity, fairness, and accountability are consistently applied across contexts. Over time, this builds trust in participatory processes, reinforces the legitimacy of youth contributions, and empowers young people as co-creators of democratic spaces.

Icebreakers and energisers for participation activities

Icebreakers and energisers are vital tools in youth participation activities because they help establish an atmosphere of trust, openness, and inclusion, which are prerequisites for meaningful engagement. While often perceived as light-hearted or entertaining, these activities serve a deeper pedagogical purpose by breaking down interpersonal barriers, reducing initial anxieties, and encouraging participants to interact across social, cultural, and linguistic divides. By creating a welcoming environment, icebreakers and energisers ensure that all participants feel comfortable contributing, thereby promoting equity in group dynamics and facilitating active involvement from the outset.

Icebreakers are particularly effective at the beginning of an event or session, as they enable participants to get to know one another, discover shared experiences, and build rapport. They function as entry points into group processes, helping individuals to transition from passive attendance to active engagement. For young people who may be hesitant, shy, or unfamiliar with participatory settings, icebreakers can lower psychological barriers by fostering informal connections and signalling that their presence is valued. In diverse groups, these activities can also highlight commonalities while respecting differences, thereby promoting intercultural understanding and empathy.

Energisers, in contrast, are typically used during the course of an activity to maintain attention, restore energy, and sustain group motivation. Long discussions, debates, or workshops can be mentally and emotionally demanding, and energisers provide a much-needed opportunity for participants to reset and re-engage. These short, interactive activities often involving movement, creativity, or humour help revitalise focus and encourage continued participation. Importantly, energisers are not merely interruptions but deliberate tools for reinforcing inclusion, as they ensure that all participants, regardless of background or personality, remain actively involved in the process.

When thoughtfully selected and facilitated, icebreakers and energisers contribute to group cohesion and strengthen the collective learning environment. They set the tone for respectful and collaborative participation by modelling inclusivity and reinforcing the principle that every voice matters. Moreover, they can be adapted to specific goals, such as highlighting themes of diversity, practising communication, or encouraging teamwork, thus linking the activity directly to broader objectives of civic competence development.



Ultimately, icebreakers and energisers do more than create a pleasant atmosphere, they lay the groundwork for effective participation by fostering trust, dismantling hierarchies, and encouraging authentic interaction. In youth participation contexts, where inclusion, confidence, and empowerment are essential, these tools are indispensable in ensuring that all young people feel able to engage meaningfully and contribute to shaping collective outcomes.

Icebreakers are typically used at the beginning of a session or event to help participants get to know one another and feel at ease. They are especially important when bringing together diverse groups of young people who may have never met before. Activities such as name games, storytelling circles, or “two truths and a lie” allow participants to introduce themselves in a relaxed and engaging way. By starting with something light and interactive, icebreakers reduce anxiety, build confidence, and establish a sense of equality within the group, ensuring that no one feels excluded or overshadowed.

Energisers, on the other hand, are short and dynamic activities used throughout a session to maintain energy levels, focus, and motivation. They are particularly effective during long events or after intensive discussions, when participants may feel tired or disengaged. Activities like quick movement games, collective challenges, or rhythm exercises help to re-energise the group and refocus attention. Energizers also play an important role in balancing serious discussions with moments of play, reminding participants that participation can be both meaningful and enjoyable.

Both icebreakers and energisers contribute to inclusion by creating shared experiences that bring participants together across differences. For example, cooperative games or creative challenges emphasise teamwork and highlight the value of diverse contributions.

These activities also help facilitators build a supportive environment where young people feel safe to express themselves, even when addressing sensitive or complex issues later in the programme.

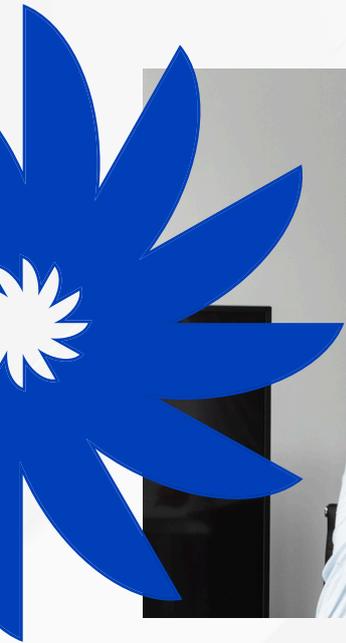
When carefully chosen to match the group's size, context, and cultural background, icebreakers and energisers can transform a gathering into a genuinely participatory space. They build trust, strengthen group cohesion, and encourage active involvement, ensuring that young people not only take part in activities but feel truly included and empowered throughout the process.

Checklists for organisers (before, during, and after youth events)

Checklists for organisers are practical tools that ensure youth participation events are well-prepared, inclusive, and impactful. They provide step-by-step guidance before, during, and after activities, helping organisers anticipate challenges, manage processes smoothly, and secure meaningful outcomes. A structured checklist acts as both a planning aid and a quality assurance tool, making sure that nothing essential is overlooked and that events reflect the principles of inclusion, empowerment, and sustainability.

Before the event, preparation is key. Organisers should first define the objectives and expected outcomes of the activity, ensuring that the event has a clear purpose that aligns with the needs of young people and policymakers. The venue and format must be accessible, with considerations for physical access, online tools, and translation if needed. Invitations should reach a diverse group of participants, paying attention to gender balance, cultural diversity, and the inclusion of marginalised youth. Materials such as agendas, presentations, or background information must be prepared in multiple formats to ensure accessibility. Organisers should also plan logistics carefully, including travel arrangements, accommodation, and financial support for disadvantaged participants. A strong preparatory phase lays the foundation for inclusive and successful participation.

During the event, the focus shifts to facilitation and ensuring meaningful engagement. Organisers should welcome participants warmly, explain the purpose and structure of the event, and establish ground rules for respectful dialogue. Facilitators should encourage balanced participation, making sure that all voices are heard and that no group dominates the discussion. Icebreakers and energisers should be used to create trust and maintain energy.



Organisers should monitor accessibility throughout, checking that digital tools function properly, that interpretation services are available, and that participants feel safe and supported. Documentation of discussions, ideas, and recommendations must also take place during the event, so that the outcomes can be captured accurately.

After the event, follow-up is critical for demonstrating accountability and sustaining impact. Organisers should compile the documentation into a report or summary that is shared with all participants, including both youth and policymakers. Feedback questionnaires should be distributed and analysed to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the event. Importantly, organisers must ensure that commitments made during the event are acted upon, whether through follow-up meetings, progress updates, or integration into policy processes. Finally, sharing outcomes with wider networks and highlighting the contributions of young people helps strengthen visibility and encourages further participation.

By following a structured checklist before, during, and after youth events, organisers can guarantee that participation is not only well-managed but also meaningful and impactful. These checklists serve as a practical reminder that successful youth engagement requires careful preparation, inclusive facilitation, and committed follow-up to turn dialogue into real change.

Contact list of IncludeYOU partners and networks

The contact list of IncludeYOU partners and networks is an important resource for anyone wishing to build on the project's achievements, exchange good practices, or establish new collaborations in the field of youth participation.



By connecting with the organisations that led and implemented IncludeYOU, youth workers, educators, policymakers, and civil society actors can access expertise, share experiences, and develop joint initiatives that continue to strengthen democratic engagement across Europe. The network represents a diverse partnership spanning Greece, Spain, Hungary, and Türkiye, each bringing unique perspectives and strengths to the project.

In Greece, Fifty-Fifty has played a central role in promoting civic competences and creating youth councils. The organisation focuses on equality and inclusive participation, providing platforms for young people to engage directly with policymakers. Its work highlights the importance of structured opportunities for dialogue at the local level, ensuring that youth voices are integrated into decision-making processes in a sustainable and impactful way.

In Spain, ASEID has concentrated on social inclusion and employability programmes for young people. By combining professional skills training with civic engagement opportunities, ASEID addresses both the economic and democratic dimensions of inclusion. Its initiatives empower young people who face barriers in accessing the labour market while also ensuring that they are equipped to participate fully in society and influence policy at multiple levels.

In Hungary, Fiatalok Egységben has developed strong expertise in intercultural dialogue and cultural projects. By bringing together young people from diverse backgrounds, the organisation creates spaces where stereotypes can be challenged, mutual understanding can be built, and diversity is celebrated as a strength. Its activities demonstrate the role of cultural exchange in promoting democratic participation and ensuring that youth engagement reflects the richness of European societies.



In Türkiye, Daphne Youth has focused on supporting refugees and marginalised young people. By providing safe spaces and tailored programmes, the organisation addresses the multiple barriers faced by vulnerable groups, ensuring that they are not excluded from civic life. Its work demonstrates that youth participation must be rooted in inclusion, with special attention given to those most at risk of being left behind.

These partners form a vibrant network that reflects the diversity of European youth and the variety of approaches needed to strengthen participation. Their contact list is not only a practical resource but also an invitation to continue collaboration across borders, drawing on the lessons and successes of IncludeYOU to inspire new initiatives. The network demonstrates that when organisations with different experiences and expertise work together, they can create powerful and replicable models of youth participation that respond to local realities while contributing to shared European goals.

Suggested bibliography and online resources

A suggested bibliography and list of online resources is an essential element of the IncludeYOU Toolkit, as it provides youth workers, educators, policymakers, and young people themselves with reliable references and practical tools to deepen their understanding of youth participation. These resources combine European policy documents, programme guidelines, training manuals, and online platforms, offering both theoretical foundations and hands-on materials that can be applied in practice. By consulting them, users of the Toolkit can connect their local initiatives to broader European strategies and benefit from the wealth of knowledge already available in the field of youth work and civic engagement.

The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 is a cornerstone document that outlines the European Union’s vision for empowering young people through the guiding principles of Engage, Connect, and Empower.



It also introduces the eleven European Youth Goals, which provide a roadmap for creating youth-friendly societies. This strategy is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand how local and national youth initiatives connect to European objectives and how young people's voices are meant to be systematically integrated into policy processes.

Erasmus+ resources are another vital reference point. The Erasmus+ Programme Guide offers comprehensive information on funding opportunities, eligibility, and priorities for youth participation projects, while the European Youth Portal provides accessible information about mobility opportunities, volunteering, and youth policies. These resources help organisations and individuals design, apply for, and implement projects that strengthen youth participation at both local and European levels.

Youth work manuals provide practical guidance for developing competences and designing participatory activities. Examples include the Council of Europe's "Compass: Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People," the "Training Kits" (T-Kits) from the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, and national youth work guides published by ministries or NGOs. These manuals are filled with non-formal education methods, case studies, and step-by-step activity plans that can be directly applied in workshops, training sessions, and participatory events.

Online platforms further extend the reach of youth participation by offering tools for debate, collaboration, and policy engagement. Platforms such as the EU Youth Dialogue online space, SALTO Youth Resource Centres, and open-source collaboration tools provide opportunities for young people to engage with peers and decision-makers across borders. They also host extensive libraries of training materials, case studies, and research reports that support ongoing learning and innovation in youth work.

Bibliographic and online resources form a comprehensive support system for anyone wishing to strengthen youth participation. They link theory with practice, connect local activities with European policy frameworks, and provide ready-to-use tools for educators, youth workers, and organisations. By consulting and applying these resources, users of the IncludeYOU Toolkit can build more effective, inclusive, and sustainable initiatives that contribute to the long-term empowerment of young people in democratic life.



Conclusions and Next Steps

Summary of IncludeYOU's approach

The IncludeYOU Toolkit is more than a collection of resources; it is a call to action for young people, youth workers, educators, policymakers, and all those committed to strengthening democratic life. At its heart, the Toolkit reflects the project's comprehensive approach of fostering civic competences, building dialogue between generations and institutions, and ensuring that inclusivity is at the core of all participation processes. Rather than treating youth participation as an occasional activity, IncludeYOU frames it as a continuous and essential part of democratic systems, where young people are recognised as active contributors and agents of change.

The approach begins with the development of civic competences, recognising that meaningful participation requires knowledge, skills, and confidence. Through non-formal education methods, practical exercises, and opportunities for direct engagement, the project has equipped young people with competences such as critical thinking,



communication, leadership, and teamwork. These are not only valuable for active citizenship but also for personal growth and professional development, ensuring that youth participation strengthens both individuals and communities.

Dialogue is another cornerstone of IncludeYOU's methodology. The Toolkit demonstrates how structured dialogue platforms, round tables, policy debates, and digital tools can create genuine spaces for exchange between youth and policymakers. By promoting co-creation rather than consultation, the project has shown how young people can influence decision-making processes and contribute to policies that better reflect their realities and aspirations. This approach not only amplifies youth voices but also fosters trust, accountability, and collaboration between institutions and younger generations.

Inclusivity lies at the foundation of every aspect of the Toolkit. IncludeYOU recognises that youth participation cannot be meaningful if it excludes those from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds. By providing strategies for outreach, support mechanisms, and inclusive event design, the project has worked to ensure that all young people regardless of their social, economic, cultural, or geographical circumstances have the opportunity to participate. In doing so, it affirms that democratic participation must reflect the full diversity of society, not just the voices of a privileged few.

In summary, the IncludeYOU Toolkit integrates competence development, structured dialogue, and inclusive practices into a comprehensive and holistic framework that can be replicated and adapted across diverse European contexts. By bridging theoretical concepts with practical tools, it demonstrates that meaningful youth participation is both achievable and essential for the vitality of democratic life.

The Toolkit underscores that when young people are empowered to take initiative, when their voices are genuinely heard, and when inclusive structures ensure their equal access, they not only enrich democratic processes but also contribute to the creation of more resilient, equitable, and future-oriented societies.

More than a technical resource, the Toolkit serves as both a practical guide and a call to action. It challenges stakeholders including young people, youth workers, educators, civil society organisations, local authorities, and policymakers to adopt participatory practices that go beyond tokenism and instead foster genuine dialogue, co-creation, and shared responsibility. By doing so, it reinforces the principle that democracy is strongest when it draws on the diversity, creativity, and perspectives of its youngest citizens.

Ultimately, the IncludeYOU Toolkit positions youth participation as a cornerstone of sustainable democratic development in Europe. It provides not only the methods and resources necessary for embedding participation into everyday governance but also the normative argument for why youth must be at the centre of shaping Europe's future. In this sense, the Toolkit is an invitation to all stakeholders to commit to building democratic cultures where young people are recognised as equal partners in decision-making and as key contributors to the collective project of a fairer and more inclusive Europe.

Call to action for youth, youth workers, and policymakers

The IncludeYOU Toolkit closes with recommendations for using its resources and approaches in local, national, and European contexts. These recommendations underline the fact that youth participation must be embedded at every level of governance and society, and that the strategies, methods, and tools provided in the Toolkit are adaptable to different environments. By applying them flexibly and inclusively, stakeholders can ensure that the impact of youth engagement goes beyond individual projects and contributes to a wider culture of democratic participation.

At the local level, the Toolkit provides municipalities, schools, youth centres, and community organisations with concrete strategies for embedding participation into everyday governance and community life. Local settings are particularly significant because they constitute the environments most familiar to young people and the spaces where their contributions can generate immediate and visible change.

By applying the methods outlined in the Toolkit such as establishing youth councils, facilitating structured dialogues with municipal authorities, and initiating neighbourhood-based projects local actors can create platforms that ensure young people have a direct influence on decisions that affect their daily realities.

Youth councils, for example, offer opportunities for young people to learn democratic processes while contributing to policy discussions on education, urban development, environmental sustainability, or social inclusion. Structured dialogues at the municipal level allow for direct interaction between young people and decision-makers, fostering accountability and transparency in governance. Similarly, neighbourhood projects enable young people to co-create solutions to community challenges, such as designing public spaces, promoting intercultural exchange, or improving local services. These initiatives not only strengthen the civic competences of participants but also promote a culture of collaboration between young citizens and local authorities.

When implemented effectively, local participation processes help young people see tangible results from their involvement, which is critical for sustaining their motivation and trust in democratic institutions. Experiencing that their contributions lead to concrete outcomes reinforces the sense that participation is both meaningful and worthwhile. It also encourages continuity of engagement, as young people become more likely to remain active citizens throughout their lives. In this way, the Toolkit supports local actors in transforming participation from an abstract ideal into a lived experience, ensuring that democratic life is inclusive, responsive, and rooted in the realities of young people's communities.



At the national level, the Toolkit offers strategies for embedding youth participation into broader policy frameworks. National ministries, parliaments, and youth agencies can use the guidelines to establish permanent youth advisory boards, organise consultations on key policy areas, or design national youth strategies that reflect the voices of diverse groups. By adopting models such as structured dialogues and participation labs, national authorities can ensure that young people are not just consulted occasionally but are consistently included in shaping laws and policies that affect them.

At the European level, the Toolkit connects directly to the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Goals, especially Goal 9 on Space and Participation for All. European institutions, networks, and programmes can draw on the Toolkit to design transnational dialogues, youth forums, and cross-border projects that give young people the opportunity to engage with European policymaking. Online platforms and hybrid participation tools outlined in the Toolkit are particularly valuable for connecting young people across countries, making participation more accessible and representative at the continental scale.

In all contexts, the key recommendation is to ensure that the Toolkit is not treated as a static document but as a living resource. Stakeholders are encouraged to adapt the methods to their own realities, experiment with new approaches, and continuously evaluate and improve participation practices. The Toolkit should be integrated into ongoing strategies rather than used only in isolated projects, so that youth participation becomes a sustained and structural element of democratic life.

By applying the recommendations at local, national, and European levels, stakeholders can transform the IncludeYOU Toolkit into a practical driver of change. It becomes a means of ensuring that young people are empowered, included, and heard everywhere decisions are made, reinforcing democracy and building stronger, more resilient societies for the future.

Recommendations for using the toolkit in local, national, and European contexts
The IncludeYOU Toolkit is deliberately designed as a flexible and adaptable resource that can be implemented across different governance levels local, national, and European thereby ensuring that youth participation is embedded as a consistent and sustainable practice throughout society. Its strength lies in its capacity to respond to the specificities of diverse contexts while maintaining a coherent framework that promotes inclusivity, dialogue, and active citizenship.

At the local level, the Toolkit provides concrete instruments for municipalities, schools, and community organisations to create participatory structures tailored to the everyday realities of young people. Examples include establishing youth councils that function as consultative bodies for municipal authorities, organising participatory spaces within schools or community centres where youth can deliberate on issues of relevance to their peers, and facilitating structured dialogues between young citizens and local policymakers. These practices empower young people to engage in decisions that directly affect their education, neighbourhoods, and social environments. At the same time, they contribute to the development of more inclusive and responsive communities, where the perspectives of youth are systematically integrated into local governance processes.

At the national level, the Toolkit serves as a guide for policymakers and institutions to strengthen youth participation systems and embed youth voices into the policy cycle. It offers models for consultations, policy laboratories, and co-creation processes that allow young people to actively contribute to the development and monitoring of youth-related strategies. By institutionalising youth participation at the national scale, governments can ensure that policies are not only informed by evidence but also grounded in the lived realities of younger generations. This contributes to the legitimacy of public institutions, enhances trust between youth and state authorities, and aligns national frameworks with broader European commitments to democratic participation.

At the European level, the Toolkit directly supports the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the European Youth Goals, particularly Goal 9 on Space and Participation for All. By promoting structured dialogue platforms, cross-national exchanges, and collaborative policy processes, the Toolkit enables young people to connect their local and national experiences with European decision-making arenas. This strengthens their sense of belonging to the European project while ensuring that European policies reflect the diversity of youth voices across the continent. In doing so, the Toolkit not only contributes to youth-friendly governance in Europe but also reinforces the EU's broader ambition of fostering democratic resilience and social cohesion through inclusive participation.

At the national level, the Toolkit offers a structured set of methods and strategies designed to strengthen institutional systems of participation and to embed youth engagement more firmly within national policy frameworks.

National authorities, including ministries, parliaments, and national youth councils, are uniquely positioned to shape long-term structures that influence the lives of young people across entire countries. The Toolkit provides these actors with practical guidance on establishing advisory mechanisms, organising large-scale consultations, and integrating the perspectives of youth into legislative and policy processes.

One key approach is the creation of formal advisory structures, such as youth advisory boards or consultative councils linked to ministries or parliamentary committees. These bodies serve as institutionalised platforms through which young people can provide ongoing input into policy development, thereby transforming participation into a sustained and systemic practice rather than an occasional exercise. Similarly, national consultations supported by the Toolkit can be used to gather diverse perspectives from young people across different regions and backgrounds, ensuring that policies reflect not only the views of the most active or privileged groups but the broader realities of the youth population.

The Toolkit also provides essential support to national youth councils by offering practical, replicable methods for fostering meaningful dialogue between young people and decision-makers. It enhances councils' capacity to conduct effective advocacy, coordinate representation across multiple policy areas, and strategically influence national decision-making processes.

By employing structured methods such as policy labs, thematic round tables, participatory monitoring tools, co-design workshops, and consultation frameworks youth councils can move beyond tokenistic or symbolic representation and take an active role in shaping policy. These approaches not only ensure that youth perspectives are genuinely incorporated into national strategies but also strengthen councils' organizational capabilities, enabling them to manage complex multi-stakeholder interactions and maintain sustained engagement over time. In addition, the Toolkit encourages councils to embed mechanisms for feedback, evaluation, and iterative improvement, allowing young people to see the tangible outcomes of their contributions. By fostering such participatory structures, the Toolkit ensures that youth councils can function as credible, influential partners in governance, amplifying young people's voices and enhancing the responsiveness, accountability, and inclusivity of national policies.

By integrating these approaches into the structures and practices of ministries, parliaments, youth councils, and other national institutions, authorities can ensure that youth participation is not treated as a temporary initiative or add-on, but becomes a permanent and recognised feature of governance. Institutionalising engagement mechanisms reduces the risk of fragmented or short-term projects that fail to create lasting impact, while establishing youth participation as a cornerstone of national democratic culture. Such systemic inclusion allows young people to contribute meaningfully to policy development, legislative processes, and decision-making at all levels, ensuring that their perspectives are genuinely reflected in outcomes. In turn, this strengthens the legitimacy and accountability of governance, produces policies that are more responsive to the needs and aspirations of younger generations, and fosters a more resilient, participatory, and forward-looking democracy capable of addressing both present and future societal challenges.

At the European level, the Toolkit is closely aligned with the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Goals, particularly Youth Goal 9: Space and Participation for All. It provides practical tools and methodologies for linking local and national initiatives to broader European dialogues, policy frameworks, and decision-making processes. By offering structured guidance, the Toolkit enables youth organisations, policymakers, and other stakeholders to design transnational projects, actively participate in the EU Youth Dialogue process, and strengthen young people's capacity to influence decisions across multiple levels of governance. In doing so, it reinforces the position of youth as equal partners in shaping a more inclusive, participatory, and youth-friendly Europe, ensuring that European policy commitments are translated into meaningful, tangible actions on the ground.

By applying the Toolkit in local communities, national systems, and European institutions, stakeholders can ensure that youth participation is not treated as an abstract ideal but realised as a concrete and sustainable practice. At the local level, municipalities, schools, and youth organisations can use the Toolkit to establish councils, forums, and participatory projects that directly engage young people in shaping decisions that affect their daily lives. At the national level, policymakers and institutions can draw on the Toolkit's methods to design inclusive consultation processes, integrate youth perspectives into policy agendas, and institutionalise mechanisms that guarantee the systematic involvement of young citizens.

At the European level, the Toolkit aligns with frameworks such as the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the European Youth Goals, particularly Goal 9 on Space and Participation for All, thereby reinforcing continental efforts to create a more youth-friendly and participatory Europe (European Commission, 2018).

In this sense, the Toolkit functions simultaneously as a guide and as an instrument for achieving meaningful change. It provides a conceptual foundation that frames youth participation as a democratic right and a social necessity, while also offering practical tools including templates, case studies, and participatory methodologies that enable stakeholders to translate these principles into action. By embedding inclusivity, equity, and accountability into participatory practices, the Toolkit empowers young people to assume their role as active citizens and partners in governance.

The broader impact of applying the Toolkit extends far beyond the scope of individual projects or initiatives. When young people are provided with genuine opportunities for meaningful participation, they not only influence immediate outcomes but also develop essential civic competences, self-confidence, and a sustained commitment to democratic life. These experiences cultivate a generation of engaged citizens who are better equipped to contribute constructively to their communities and to advocate for social and political change. In turn, such engagement enhances the legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness of democratic institutions, making them more resilient and better able to address the needs of all citizens. By linking practical action with long-term capacity-building, the Toolkit functions not merely as a technical resource, but as a catalyst for fostering stronger, more inclusive, and future-ready democracies across Europe.



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IncludeYOU



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