



by Bettina Schwarzmayr

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# Who leads?

## Through youth participation today to the **leaders of tomorrow**

**Supporting and encouraging young people to participate, giving them the opportunity to voice their concerns and aspirations, is necessary if we want to ensure that they will be equipped to deal with the challenges of tomorrow. This article addresses three approaches towards meaningful participation of young people: inclusiveness, legal measures, and empowerment.**

Coyote Theme

### ► Increasing participation through inclusiveness

Youth organisations play a key role in reducing the gap between where decisions about society are made and where they are implemented. We do this by being there both when decisions are made and when they are carried out. We are engaged in opening up political processes at all levels, and making them accessible to young people. Efforts to ensure equal participation are central to the work of many NGOs, who remain conscious of the internal atmosphere at meetings and in their structures, given that exclusion happens easily and is sometimes hard to notice unless specific attention is drawn to it.

This can, however, unfortunately not counter balance the inadequate representation of youth in parliaments or in governments. The marginalisation of many young people and the discrimination of many women, migrants, people with disabilities or those living in poverty, leads to exclusion. Racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia are still, like other forms of discrimination, not abstract but a sad and daily reality and hinder the full participation of many people living in Europe today.

Increasing the awareness of teachers, police officers, health and care workers, public administration, and Human Resource Units, to name but a few, is indispensable to increasing opportunities for all. Such action implies the genuine extension of opportunities to the most marginalised in society, to enable them to exercise the power that the rest of society takes for

granted; for youth organisations and NGOs, this means reaching out to oppressed youth and making sure that they are provided the space to speak for themselves, are listened to, and are heard.

The struggle for proportional representation seems to be the same – from biblical times to the present day. Matthew’s Parable of the Talents starts with each servant receiving money according to his ability. Matthew 25:29 concludes «For the one who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough. But the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.» The servant receiving the least money is in addition condemned for his lack of action.

Looking into participation projects, we can sometimes see the same effect; some projects often tend to give more opportunities to those who already have many opportunities, to those who are well integrated and articulate, especially when it comes to one-off events without prior support schemes. If we want to advocate towards a culture of participation – we must ensure disparities are counter-balanced – being proactive and ‘hands-on’ is not equally feasible for every citizen.

### ► Increasing participation through law

In 1950, 40% of the EU25 population was under 25; that figure fell to 30% by 2000 and is expected to be less than a quarter by 2025, according to the Bureau of European Policy Advisers’ consultation paper on Europe’s social reality. The proportion of the EU25 population over 65 is forecast to rise from almost 16% in 2000 to 22% in 2025 and 30%



in 2050, contrasting with 9% a century earlier in 1950. Due to this rapid demographic change, young people are facing growing challenges to finding their place in a society where older generations, who are stereotypically more conservative and reluctant to change, become a majority. As young people are becoming a minority in Europe, the decisions taken by the majority are becoming less reflective of young people's views and expectations. The YFJ, therefore, brings to the European debate the lowering of the voting age to 16 across Europe.

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The decisions taken by the majority are becoming less reflective of young people's views and expectations. Lowering the voting age to 16 could ensure a broader representation of young people in collective decisions affecting them. Whereas young people between 16 and 18 often have responsibilities as employees, taxpayers or parents, lowering the voting age to 16 would restore the balance between their rights and responsibilities. A minimum representation of young people in elected positions should also exist in order to lower this demographic gap. Any political strategy for youth cannot succeed without the engagement of young people themselves. An investment and empowerment strategy for young people is what we need to overcome all these current social challenges. Helping them achieve an autonomous life through education that renders them employable, through accessible and decent jobs, through social security and access to health and housing will be an investment that will pay off with interest. At the same time, enabling them to become responsible citizens, and to be actively involved in the life around them, will empower young people to feel secure in taking responsible choices in life. After all, youth prosperity is everybody's responsibility.

### ► Increasing participation through empowerment

EU communications commissioner Margot Wallström recently highlighted her dismay regarding the «reign of old men» in Brussels corridors: «An inner circle of male decision-makers agree behind closed doors on whom to nominate to EU top jobs,» she told the Swedish daily *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, in February 2008. Observations such as these indicate that the same old story is being repeated - those who are in power reproduce the power structures to preserve their own positions.

NGOs as well as public authorities must be conscious of the risk of reproducing structures of exclusion, and serving as the hothouse for elites. In seeking to demonstrate that we are responsible leaders, youth leaders must embody the diversity of our constituencies, recognising their heterogeneous needs, and duly articulating them. For youth organisations, reaching out goes beyond quota systems, political correctness, or ill-thought out idealism; reaching out means providing excluded youth with opportunities for participation, and access to those opportunities. This signifies a true acceptance of the agency of young people to make decisions and act on their own behalf no matter where they stand in life right now. We must also actively encourage young people to constantly voice their views, needs, and concerns - towards youth organisations and also, with their help, towards other stakeholders.

WASP is a term used in the United States - an acronym for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, referring to a group that was ruling the country for centuries. In Europe WHAM (white heterosexual able-bodied man) is used to describe the leading elite.

It is time for more diversity in Europe's leadership, no matter if they be majors in the military or business CEOs – decision-making must be more reflective of constituents in order to be sustainable.

Let's leave WHAM in the 80's. ■

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